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ARK

ROK

Special Army of Familiars

He followed the Hand Mirror's light for quite a while.

Ark's journey so far was a monotonous repetition of his daily routine.

The light of the Hand Mirror that functioned as a compass only came out at night.

Since he was following the light in a straight line, he ended up on a route consisting of mostly mountains. So when the light disappeared, he couldn't determine the direction and always wandered off.

Naturally, the method of following the Hand Mirror's light at night and wandering the area and hunting at day solidified.

Once he entered the Argus Mountains that surrounded the Jackson territory, the monsters became a level stronger.

The Magal Wolves possesses defensive powers incomparable to a regular Wolf, and the Bengal Tiger boasted of outrageous attack power with its knife-long fangs, constantly ambushing him.

However, Ark had raised his level to the limit in what was called the highest level dungeon in the Jackson area, the Shadow Forest.

There were no opponents dangerous enough for Ark, who had even hunted a Reaper.

The situation changed one week after the journey started; over two days had passed in real time.

The Magal Wolves' and Bengal Tigers' attacks gradually lessened.

Based on his experience, Ark knew what the change meant.

‘Looks like I’ve passed the territory.’

Like people, what was called disposition also existed for monsters.

The disposition determined the friendship between monsters.

In other words, if similar small monsters were set to be hostile, they did not approach each other. If they were set as a natural enemies like the relationship between a mouse and a wolf, then fights between them would break out.

Thanks to this system being in place, a monster’s domain was naturally made.

The ambushes of the Magal Wolves and Bengal Tigers were decreasing meant the domain was changing.

‘What kind of monster’s domain is this?’

It’d be a sticky situation if he suddenly encountered a high-level monster.

“Bat, observe the surrounding carefully and inform me immediately if anything shows up.”

“Got it, Master.”

Ark utilized Bat to increase his vigilance thoroughly as he traversed the forest. Soon, he spotted a few monsters between the thick bushes.

‘The face of a dog and a human’s body, they’re Gnolls!’

There were three of them, and they were drooling saliva while roasting a monster that looked like a Bengal Tiger under a fire. In other words, that meant they were strong enough to hunt a Bengal Tiger.

A Bengal Tiger wasn’t an easy opponent either. If they were stronger than a

Bengal Tiger, then they weren't opponents to thoughtlessly come at.

'What to do? Should I try fighting 'em?'

Ark was contemplating when one Gnoll suddenly raised its head and let out a cry.

"GRRRRR."

"It's a Human. I smell the scent of a Human!"

"Let's catch and eat it, Human meat is more delicious."

It was a mistake to hide with his back to the wind. The Gnolls with their sensitive sense of smell carried their clubs and approached while flaring their noses.

"Damn, no other choice. Skull, Bat. Assist me."

Ark swung his sword at a Gnoll as he leapt from the woods.

The Gnoll caught by the ambush received a critical hit and was thrown back.

"Eyes of the Cat!"

Ark's irises became awash in gold as the Gnoll's weak points and information were displayed.

'Level 45, many weak points too. At this level, I can somehow fight them.'

"Skull, Bat. We're concentrating our attack on one of 'em! Dark Blade!"

Ark loosed a concentrated attack on the Gnoll's weak point.

It was disadvantageous to be surrounded by three level 45 monsters. When fighting a group, it was important to focus the offensive power on one

opponent first to reduce the number of enemies.

With Eyes of the Cat and Dark Blade as well as the addition of the Familiars' co-op bonus, the Gnoll's health decreased to 70 percent in an instant. But something strange happened.

The remaining Gnolls kept their distance even while their teammate was under attack. At that moment while Ark was thinking it was strange, the two Gnolls raised their bows.

'Archer!'

He had not tried fighting any monster using a bow until now.

Therefore, Ark had never even considered a countermeasure concerning a bow attack.

"Damn it! Bat, block it! If you can't block it, it's five times of food!"

"Waah, stop, you dog head!"

At Ark's threat, Bat struck the archer's face while screaming.

Its outstretched wings blocked its eyes, making the arrow fly off wildly. But the other Gnoll's loosed arrow sank into Ark's shoulder.

- You have been hit by a critical blow from a Gnoll's arrow! 250 damage.
Movement speed reduced for 30 seconds.

The situation became desperate.

The arrow decreased attack speed and increased chance of attack failure.

Moreover, just getting hit increased the chance of getting hit by a critical hit

and catching an abnormal status like Slow or Bleed.

While Ark was staggering, a Gnoll's club came flying at him. His movements were slow and his body felt heavy, as if someone was holding onto it.

'Damn, if I get hit again in this condition, it'll be another critical hit...'

Clack clack clack!

Just then, Skull's eyes flashed as it tumbled under the approaching Gnoll's feet. The Gnoll who stepped on Skull, lost its balance and toppled down. At that moment, a red light poured from the Gnoll's whole body.

Simultaneously, a message window popped up with a cheerful tune.

After gaining 100 skill points, the skill Eyes of the Cat has leveled up to Intermediate.

Eyes of the Cat (Intermediate, Active): Eyes of the Cat has leveled up to Intermediate, you can grasp more information and weak points concerning the opponent.

As an Intermediate bonus, if you seize a golden opportunity, you can deal a double critical effect. For 3 minutes

+Night Vision.

+Life Detection

+Weakness Perception.

+Double Critical Chance. Mana Consumption : 70

*Double Critical : The opponent will fall into a completely defenseless state.

Depending on the situation and the enemy's reaction, a Double Critical Chance will be provided for roughly 1~3 seconds.

If Double Critical Chance is invoked, one attack can deal 2 times the critical damage.

‘Double Critical Chance!’

The timing when the enemy went into a completely defenseless state, making its whole body turn into weak points!

Using Eyes of the Cat like crazy had paid off.

Ark's sword sank into the Gnoll's nape.

- You have landed critical hit with two times the Double Critical Chance. As a co-op bonus with Skull, 30% additional damage has been added.

With just one attack, the Gnoll's Health was decreased by over 20 percent. After a few more attacks, the Gnoll disappeared while screaming its death cry.

The situation changed completely once the Gnoll standing in front of him, blocking him had disappeared. There were two Gnolls left. One of them was being blocked by Bat.

‘With my consciousness, I'll concentrate on one of them!’

Clink—!

The reflexes he had sharpened and polished by diligently training Taekwondo shone brightly. Ark parried the flying arrow with his sword by calculating the timing.

Perhaps because he did not have a defense-related skill like Warriors did, but parry was not registered with perfect defense. However, New World was a world in which the same rules as reality were applied. The damage was reduced to less than half and a critical hit did not register.

‘As long as a critical hit isn’t invoked, something like an Archer isn’t a match!’

Ark, whose Slow hex had dissipated, quickly advanced on the Archer.

It was common sense that a monster with long-ranged attack was possibly weak to melee attacks! The Gnoll who had shot arrows became feeble at Ark’s attack and staggered.

Just then, he heard the sound of Bat caterwauling from the other side.

“Damned Master! Aren’t you even paying attention to me?”

There was a limit when Bat was blocking a Gnoll Archer alone. With an arrow lodged in its head, Bat disappeared at the Gnoll Archer’s feet.

- Familiar Hatred-bearing Bat has been forcefully recalled to the Netherworld. You have received 50% of the Familiar’s Health as damage.

A tingly sensation like surging electricity flowed into Ark’s body and he lost

100 Health.

At the unexpected damage, Ark was thrown into an extremely dangerous situation.

While he was battling against one Gnoll Archer, the other Gnoll freed from Bat's interference, shot an arrow towards Ark's back.

The state of abnormal vulnerability!

'I'll die if I get hit directly!'

Arc suddenly lift Skull.

A critical hit was dealt as the arrow penetrated its forehead, and Skull was forcefully recalled back to the Netherworld in just one blow.

His Health was once again decreased by about 100. But he would have died if the arrow had hit him.

"You swine! I'll make you pay as a revenge for Skull and Bat!"

Truthfully, he didn't have the right to utter such words.

In any case, Ark parried the Gnoll Archer's oncoming arrow and rushed in. At the end of a one minute desperate struggle, he toppled the last Gnoll Archer.

“Dark Blade!”

"Kuuuaak, Human... Just wait and see!"

With a dying scream, the Gnoll's body slowly faded away.

"Phew, I was somehow able to win."

Ark sank to the ground as he exhaled the breath he had been holding in.

Just then, his experience bar which had been stuck at 92% reached 100% in an instant, and with a cheerful tune and his level rose.

The Gnolls gave a lot of experience compared to their level. In addition, the Gnoll was a party monster. It wasn't an enemy that wandered alone. Exterminating a party monster that unleashed complementary co-op attacks added a 30% bonus to experience.

But he couldn't be thoughtlessly happy.

'Dammit, seems like it'll be difficult to continue hunting Gnolls since all my Familiars were forcefully recalled.'

About one or two Gnolls wasn't a match. The problem was Gnolls formed a party and fought in an organized manner.

Well, it wasn't really tremendous strategizing since they were just dog heads. At best, a Gnoll Archer would shoot arrows from afar while a Gnoll Warrior would block Ark, an incomparably simple strategy.

However, it was as effective as it was simple.

If he heedlessly fought alone, he would probably fall over after becoming a porcupine before he could take down a Gnoll Warrior.

Of course, there would be no problem at all if Ark formed a party.

But Ark, who was consumed by a deep-rooted distrust of users, wanted to avoid party hunting if possible.

And even if Ark wanted to, there wasn't a user who would come all the way to a remote area like this to help him, who was constantly moving because of a quest.

'It would be better to avoid the Gnolls until I can resummon my Familiars.'

He had to wait 24 hours or three days in game time before he could call forth his recalled Familiars.

For the first time since leaving Jackson, Ark turned back.

It was the first time both his Familiars were simultaneously forcefully recalled. He didn't know how useful they useful and helpful his Familiars had been until they were gone.

Bat's scouting ability, and the ability to distract the enemies attention when there were several monsters around, in addition to the co-op bonus of the Familiars. Ark hadn't largely realized these effects. But now that they were gone, hunting was twice as hard. It also took a lot of time, so just defeating one Bengal Tiger consumed 3~4 minutes. Since it took double the time it took when he'd cleared them in 1~2 minutes, he actually felt his experience

wasn't increasing.

But the truly puzzling thing was something else.

'Damn, why does hunting feel this boring now?'

Ark hunted without rest. When a monster appeared, he just took it down with his sword the way his body was familiar with. He picked up items and foraged food ingredients. Then he summoned Netherworld's Egg in his spare time and made it absorb food. Since there wasn't anything different from before, it wasn't exciting.

'I'm gonna go crazy.'

Ark let out a frustrating sigh.

Similar to NPCs, Familiars also had the ability to think for themselves.

Skull and Bat's reactions changed depending on Ark's attitude. For Skull, it was a Familiar with absolute obedience towards Ark, so its reaction didn't change significantly. However, for Bat, if Ark just pushed him around straight up with a heavy hand, it would sulk and there were times when it wouldn't talk for a while, and when a battle broke out, it would run away.

But then when he humored it a little, it soon honeyed him as if it would lick his boot. Sometimes it even pointed out things that Ark hadn't thought of.

'Why are NPCs so picky with their preferences?'

At first, he didn't like that he had to pay attention to each and every one of

those points. Moreover, since it consumed Mana when a fight broke out, his usage of skill was limited. So sometimes, there were times when he wondered if he really needed to summon his Familiars.

But it seemed Ark had become adapted to it before realized.

After his father passed away, he was too busy making a living so he'd never hung out with friends. That same nature applied even in New World. Moreover, because his experience in the beginning was nothing but betrayal, he was stained with a deep-rooted mistrust of users and he'd come to avoid users.

However, Ark was also human.

He'd gotten used to living alone, but it wasn't enjoyable. Even in New World, he'd sometimes felt loneliness while struggling and hunting for a few days in a dark forest. At some point, he stopped feeling lonely, which was after he had his Familiars around.

At the very least, it was evident that Skull, who showed absolute loyalty, and even Bat who constantly grumbled were on Ark's side.

Their existence that moved for Ark without desiring any price in return.

They were existences Ark hadn't been able to find in reality or the game.

It was just that he hadn't felt it until now, but to Ark, the Familiars already weren't simply characters, but comrades he could trust.

'24 hours... is long time.'

For the first time since starting the game, time felt long to him.

‘Now I won’t let the Familiars get forcefully recalled a second time.’

Ark thought earnestly of his Familiars at last.

“Damn it!”

24 hours finally passed.

As soon as it was summoned, Bat pointed at its forehead and threw a fit.

“Did you see? Did you *SEE*? I’m saying the arrow struck **RIGHT HERE** and it got stuck! Do you know how much it HURT?”

Ark was not surprised.

When a user received damage, they didn’t feel the pain. Only a stinging sensation like a slight static shock. But NPCs were different. If they were cut with a knife, they would feel the pain of getting cut by a knife. So if they were hit by an arrow, they would feel the exact pain of getting hit by an arrow.

It was just a programming setting, but everything was real to an NPC.

“If you’re the master, shouldn’t you take care of your Familiars like a master? But we endured even your **HORRIBLE** experiments of food since you’re our master! But for you to use us as **SHIELDS**! Even if you’re our master, I

CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE! Skull! You say something too!"

Clack clack clack clack.

Skull clacked its teeth with a slightly sullen movement.

"You see! It's so bad that Skull is also acting this way, huh?"

"Alright, I understand. I'll be careful next time."

"Hmph, words like that... eh? What. What did you say?"

The snorting Bat flinched and stepped back. Then it stared at Ark with eyes filled with wariness.

"Ma-master, did you eat something bad? Why're you suddenly acting like this?"

"Like you said, I was a little extreme. I mean this as an apology."

Ark extended food that exuded an aromatic smell.

Then Bat went pale as it shortly made excuses with a servile voice.

"Ma-master. I, I was wrong. I just wanted Master to pay a little more attention to us, so... hehehe. Well, I'm not saying I'll disobey you, just that it's so. Now I don't have complaints. Really."

"Don't worry. Because this dish is a tasty one."

“Huh? *Sniff sniff*, isn’t this something we’ve eaten before?”

Bat tilted its head after flaring its nostrils. It had wondered whether Ark was beating in discipline with another dreadful body experiment after Ark pushed forward the food without warning. But after blindly smelling it, it was a food that had its effect confirmed not long ago. And it was made by liberally using precious ingredients, a valuable food that raised Health and Agility for one hour.

Familiars did feel hunger, and they possessed gluttony towards tasty foods. But its instinct to protect itself came before the food. Bat stared at Ark with suspicious eyes after gulping down its saliva.

“Thi-this doesn’t have poison in it, right?”

“Shall I make you one with poison mixed in it?”

“Ack! N-no.”

Bat quickly shook its head and shoved its head into the pot.

Next, Ark made the same food again and fed it to Skull as well.

During the time he was alone, Ark had keenly realized the preciousness of his Familiars.

Of course, he couldn’t stop feeding them food, since he wanted his Familiars to grow. But he did think there was a need to converse in a friendly manner now and then. Like the carrot and the stick.

Ark's virtue allowed him to obtain unexpected information.

- The loyalty of the Familiars, who felt the sincere affection of their summoner, has increased by 1 each. Affection stat has increased by 1.

‘So Loyalty can also increase!’

Even Ark was informed of the changes in his Familiar’s loyalty.

Skull didn’t change, but in Bat’s case, if he shoveled food indiscriminately, its loyalty decreased a little. Every time that happened, it was a matter of fact that Bat didn’t listen to him as much and complained more. Until now, it hadn’t gone up even once.

‘Looks like it was probably influenced by the newly formed Affection stat.’

Ark roughly understood the situation.

The Affection stat he’d earned from succeeding the miracle of Nursing!

Until now, Ark had no idea what the stat was used for. It didn’t help at all when he raised his intimacy with the village NPCs. But he had unexpectedly learned its purpose.

That wasn’t all. The proficiency of Survival Cooking went up by 1 each when a new type of dish was created, so it rose by 4.

Food made for others had to have meaning. Since he cooked it to show his apology and gratitude towards his Familiars, bonus proficiency had been

applied.

‘Attitude applies directly to the game.’

This simple fact, which he had forgotten for a long time, hit home anew.

“Huhuhu. Master. Looks like you’ve finally realized our value.”

After being a little friendly with it, Bat soon became impudent. But Ark, who missed it for 24 hours, indulgently let it slide.

“That aside, there’s something I want to say before we start battle again.”

“What is it?”

“I thought about it carefully, but I think we’ve fought with too much of a rule-of-thumb all this while. Which brought upon a problem the last time we fought against the Gnolls. So from now onwards, there’s a need to refine our collaboration. It is to increase our survival rate as well.”

"Refining our collaboration? What do you mean, Master?"

"So what I'm saying is we need to hypothesize several situations and plot our strategy beforehand. In battle, I can't afford to assess the situation and provide commands from one to ten, since there's no time."

This was the conclusion Ark had came up with after brooding over it for 24 hours.

Ark planned strategies with several patterns oriented to situations beforehand.

Then in battle, even if he didn't issue each and every command, Bat and Skull would be able to judge the situation in their own and move.

It was a method inspired by an online FPS game.

[T/N: First Person Shooter]

“Yeah yeah, I got it. Master, you've smarten up.” Bat babbled impertinent noises once again.

Ark lightly ignored it and continued.

“There'll be mistakes if it's too complicated from the beginning. So let's restrict it to four methods for now. First, the strategy of focusing the attack on the enemy I'm fighting is Plan A. While I'm fighting one guy, you guys will distract the others' attention, that's Plan B. When Skull is fighting with me, and Bat lures the other guys far away, it'll be Plan C. And the last, Plan D, is an emergency situation. Halt all operations and you guys evade the enemy's attacks while thinking of a way to survive. Did you understand it all?”

“Got it. I like Plan D.”

Clack clack clack.

Bat and Skull expressed interest as they nodded.

“Now, then let's try practicing in an actual battle right away!”

Ark immediately led the Familiars and began to hunt. In the beginning, their opponents were the low-difficulty Magal Wolves or Bengal Tigers.

“Plan B!”

As Ark yelled, Bat and Skull leapt out first and drew the monster’s attention.

In the meantime, Ark attacked a monster from behind and decreased the number. When there was one monster left, he shifted the strategy.

“Plan A!”

Bat and Skull, who had been fleeing here and there, suddenly attacked the monster.

This method allowed him to quickly change commands, achieved the anticipated result.

Of course, there were also a few mistakes since it was their first time trying out the formation. Sharp-witted Bat adapted quickly, but dull headed Skull’s understanding fell short, so in some cases where it was a beat slower were numerous. In addition, since their plans were too simple, there were also often situations where it was difficult for a Familiar to deal with.

Each time it happened, he undoubtedly forced punishment food into the Familiar’s mouth.

“It’s a food experiment for the guy that doesn’t do it properly!”

“Aaack! I was wondering why Master became nicer somehow!”

CLA-clack, CLA-cla-cla-clack!

The Familiars became ghastly pale and went into critical condition a several times. However, since their max Health had increased quite a bit, they stayed alive. And although it was a rather low chance, they discovered growth foods which made Familiars' stats increase steadily.

Ark also steadily taught the Familiars with patience. By adding several strategies or changing them in repeated actual battle training, these points were improved little by little.

With their horror of the food, the Familiars desperately did their best to memorize and carried out the strategies. Since he used the Nursing skill appropriately, the effect was doubled. The fact that even non-combative skills could be used without limitation according to their methods of use was a charm of New World.

In the meantime, Ark's skill at calling the Familiars also improved.

“Plan D!”

Even in battle, he quickly made a command while constantly checking the Familiars' Health. And when a Familiar was fleeing with all of its might while faced with a life threatening situation, he cancelled the summoning with stunning timing.

If they were to be forcefully recalled, 50 percent of the Familiar's Health went counted as damage Ark would be taking, and it'll be impossible to resummon them for 24 hours. But if Ark cancelled the summoning, so no penalties were applied.

On the other hand, once the target of a monster chasing a Familiar

disappeared, the monster was stunned for a while.

Whenever it happens, Ark's sword undoubtedly land a critical hit.

Once the Familiar survival rate went up, their vitality in battle overflowed.

“Master, in this case, how about cancelling the summoning after I rush in? And can't you immediately resummon again? You can also do that after you throw Skull; Master's spiritual power is always full anyways, so won't you be able to use it once in every battle?”

Once in awhile, Bat, whose Intelligence had risen quite a bit through food, would even suggest a strategy worth using.

‘This adorable rascal!’

Bat's strategy was effective. Once a monster appeared, Ark grabbed and threw Skull at a weak point he'd perceived while using Eyes of the Cat. A critical hit through an unexpected ambush! Subsequently, Ark would rapidly cancelled the summoning before the monster attacked Skull. Then he resummoned again, and Skull would appear at Ark's side.

“Groowl?”

The monsters couldn't comprehend the situation and hesitated. Then when Plans C, B, and A unfurled one after another, it wasn't even necessary to use Plan D.

Thanks to Ark and the Familiars' desperate effort, they clicked perfectly. After two days of hunting in such a matter, Ark gained a level, and he entered

the domain of the Gnolls again.

“Groowl, it’s a Human.”

“Impudent Human, you dare to enter our territory.”

“We’re starting with Plan C!”

Skull and Bat fanned out according to Ark’s command.

While the Familiars quickly circled the area and diverted the attention of the Gnoll Archers, Ark deployed Dark Blade and defeated a Gnoll Warrior. Then he cancelled Skull’s summoning, who was in danger, at the same time, charging at the Gnoll Archer Skull had been distracting. While he was attacking the Gnoll Archer, Bat was flew low between the trees as it evaded arrows.

Ark, who had gotten rid of even the Gnoll Archer by raining a stream of attacks against it, summoned Skull again as he changed the plan.

“Plan A!”

Ark and the two Familiars charged at the lone Gnoll Archer at the same time.

The battle with the Gnolls, which he felt was difficult to handle before, ended so easily it was boring. The battles after that were the same.

The Gnolls normally moved as groups of three or four, and some Gnolls led around Magal Wolves. Also, since these guys were on the intelligent side, they waited in ambush. They occasionally raided as well.

In some cases, they would occasionally wound up in a situation where they had to fight as many as six monsters all at once.

However, the Familiars' strategy execution ability had grown to equal even the Special Army the Republic of Korea boasted of.

They weren't lacking even if you did call them the Special Familiar Army. Thanks to that, as they adjusted to the situation and their strategy played out, they were able to win without much difficulty.

It was an effect for a dynamic tactic.

After going around annihilating party monsters, his experience had increased as well. When he gained yet another level, Ark checked his information window.

“Stat window!”

Character Name	Ark	Race	Human
Alignment	Good +50		
Fame	480	Level	45

Profession	Dark Walker		
Title	Cat Knight, Caretaker		
Health	905	Mana	480 (+110)
Spiritual Power	100	Strength	146
Agility	186 (+17)	Stamina	156
Wisdom	25	Intelligence	91
Luck	36	Flexibility	10
Art of Communication	5	Affection	11
Special Stat: Knowledge of Ancient Relics			20

Equipment Effects

Sharply Shining Sword: Attack speed +5

Black Bear Mouse Leather Armor: Agility +2, Cold Resistance +20

Cat Paws: Attack speed +10%, Agility +15, Critical Hit Rate +10%

Crystal Golem's Helmet: Mana +100

*All abilities are increased by 20% in the dark.

* The ability to hide your body in the dark has formed (Duration time 10 minutes. Cancelled if you get into combat).

* Resistance Fear, Darkness, Blind, and Charm spells is increased by 50%.

*You can bring out the true abilities from all types of tools.

Ark invested 30 of the 50 points he'd earned from gaining 5 levels into Intelligence. It was a stat he had barely distributed any points into because in the beginning there wasn't a need to use Mana. But as he used the Familiars, his lack of Mana had became severe. Even though he raised his Mana by a lot, it was still merely 480. Even after getting the +100 Mana with the Crystal Golem's Head, it only amounted to 580.

In addition, when battles broke out, one Familiar needed 1 Mana per second. So, 290 seconds. In conclusion, he could only endure for 5 minutes from when the battle broke out. Granted, a decent battle ended within 3 minutes.

'But I'm not able to use other skills because of the Familiars.'

To Ark, Eyes of the Cat and Dark Blade were absolutely necessary skills. But using Eyes of the Cat once was cost 50 Mana. Dark Blade consumed 100

Mana.

Which meant it was too much to cast them a few times even with if he had full Mana. What was worse was, since he kept his Familiars summoned, there were many times when it was difficult to properly cast them one or two times. Because his skill usage was limited, it was a situation where his skill proficiency didn't increase properly either.

That was why Ark had invested up to 30 stats in Intelligence.

Furthermore, he didn't have thoughts of regret.

'These praiseworthy rascals.'

In Ark's eyes, as he gazed at his Familiars, possessed an affection that couldn't begin compare to the feelings he had about them a few days ago.

He could feel the Familiar's growth firsthand.

'For these rascals as well, stats aren't simply all there is to their fighting power. It's certain that their battle ability changes based on their experience, just like users.'

In New World, combat wasn't determined simply with stats.

A user's experience and their way of thought, which couldn't be checked with numbers, were all reflected in battle.

If you only looked at stats, Skull and Bat were still incomparably lousy. A win against one Wolf or the like wasn't guaranteed.

But by accumulating combat experience along with Ark, they were showing ability beyond their numbers.

They were becoming more and more dependable!

'However, there's an ambiguous part of combat experience. The fluctuation based on the situation is serious, and to guarantee definite effect, it's best to raise their stats after all.'

Therefore, Ark concentrated on ingredient gathering above hunting in order to execute Survival Cooking, the sole method for the Familiars' abilities. However, since the Familiars did their share, they became difficult.

"Kekeke, how's that, Master? You survived because of me, right?"

Clack clack clack clack.

After Bat boasted, Skull didn't lose and claimed its share of the credit.

This was exactly the problem. Bat and Skull's skills had recently grown remarkably, so there wasn't much of a justification to feed them food.

It was certain that if he thoughtlessly fed them for growth and decreased their loyalty, Bat and Skull wouldn't help Ark desperately as they did now. Despite that, they couldn't grow if he didn't feed them food.

Matching that balance unexpectedly gave him a headache.

However, he needed the definite concept of reward and punishment.

Especially in Bat's case. Oppressively pushing it yielded the opposite effect since its loyalty was low. It was a frustrating system, but in a way, it was also the reason why Ark had come to possess more attachment to the Familiars.

"Hmph! Why aren't you speaking, Master? Are you at a lost for words?" Bat crossed its arms and boasted.

"Don't be ridiculous. For something like just blocking eyes."

"Who's the person who lived thanks to that?"

"I could avoid that much even without you."

"N-no way. Surely you're not thinking of being evasive like that while feeding that awful food?"

"There are sometimes tasty ones too."

"That's once every ten!" Bat lost its temper as it yelled.

"Eh? You rebelled just now, right? Didn't you definitely rebel?"

"N-no. I am a good Familiar!"

"Shut up, offense taken. It's food for you."

What the hell, it didn't matter if he made an excuse anyways.

Before long, Bat ate a full-body paralysis food and was sprawled on the ground.

Skull, who had avoided the body experiment thanks to Bat's sacrifice, rolled around happily on the ground.

"You're... ch-cheap.... Master..."

"I'm not doing this because I like it either. It's all for your sake", Ark equivocated while averting his gaze.

Everything was satisfactory except one thing, there were still no changes found on the Netherworld's Egg. If the number of his Familiars increased, it would definitely be helpful.

But every time he fed the Egg food, it repeatedly trembled as if it were vibrating and just went back to being still.

"Just when is this guy even gonna hatch..." Ark muttered as he licked his lips.

Seeing as it reacted every time he fed it food, it seemed something was definitely going to hatch. But even when Bat and Skull's stats rose several times, the egg was still an egg. Moreover, he couldn't check the food's effect if he fed it to the egg. Since there was a limit to the food ingredients, he felt regret when he fed the egg.

"Well, it'll probably hatch sometime anyways."

Honestly, he had half given up now.

"More importantly, I should really try to find a village now."

Ark picked up the paralyzed Bat and rose from his seat.

After struggling for half a day while defeating Gnolls, he found the village.

Situated at the foot of the mountain, it was a small, sparsely populated village. There were only about 40 houses. But since people didn't live in most of them, they were left there like haunted houses. He couldn't discern anything such as liveliness on the faces of the 1~2 residents he saw.

Since it was a village situated too far from the city, he didn't see users either.

Then again, if it wasn't Ark, who had traversed the mountain in a straight line while following the hand mirror's light, they wouldn't have even been able to find a mountain village like this. Perhaps because it was a village with a soon-to-be-ruined atmosphere, but even when he stood inside the village, his map wasn't even marked.

"It's a place with a bad feeling somehow," Bat murmured with a discomfited voice from Ark's shoulder.

"Keep your mouth shut."

Whenever Ark went into a village, he lifted Skull and Bat onto his waist or shoulder so they appeared like accessories; because although they were Familiars. And since they were Undead and Demon in the first place, Ark's reputation could drop if the village NPCs found out.

'Well, though there's no reason to come back twice to a village such as this

one, it doesn't really matter much...'

Ark looked through the village with indifferent eyes. Even in a dilapidated village, thankfully the oasis of travelers, the General Store, existed.

'What a relief.'

Ark blew out a sigh while looking through his bag contents.

He had concentrated on hunting without rest for several days. In addition, he had gathered all the food ingredients he could get his hands on. Thanks to that, his bag was packed full of japtem to the point where there were no empty spaces. Although bag space was expanded slightly because of his job-changed, and the items were for the most part, stacked all because he hunted in the same area. However, he had to throw away a few items for lack of bag space.

At last, after arriving at the village, he recalled the items he'd thrown away and tears obscured his vision.

'Waah, if I'd just brought all that, it would've made another 6 gold.'

6 gold meant 60,000 won (~\$60).

He had thrown away 60,000 won on the ground and left.

If he recalled the scene of the six cabbage leaves that he adored flapping as they fluttered away, he felt like he was about to go crazy.

[T/N: *The cabbage leaves are referring to won bills, and there are six of them because in Korea, there's a bill for 10,000 won. Therefore, there are 6 bills*

for 60,000 won.]

‘At least it’s a relief there’s a village here.’

He feared imagining how much more loss he would’ve have to endure if there wasn’t one.

‘Since I have to travel across mountains, I don’t know when I’ll encounter a village again. I should depart after completely organizing my bag here and grabbing only what I need.’

When Ark entered the store, the owner had a surprised expression.

“Eh? Are you... a stranger?”

“Yes, I am.”

“For a stranger to come find our village... I cannot fathom how long it has been.”

Ark thought of something polite to say and got to the point right away.

“I will sell all of this.”

The store owner glanced at the items and said shortly, “Alright. I’ll give you 10 gold for all of it.”

“What?” Ark doubted his ears.

“Did you say 10 gold?”

“That’s right, is there something wrong?”

“Aren’t the items filling up the entire bag? To say it’s 10 gold without even looking properly? They aren’t some kind of junk, so how can you set the price by the weight of the bag?”

“I can tell even with a rough look. Where’s the good in higher numbers? There’s nothing worth using, so clubs and animal hides like these don’t make money.” The store owner spoke in a blunt tone.

Goods that could be easily acquired in the area were definitely sold for considerably cheaper price than the market price. But was that all? Because Ark had overused the Magic Restoration skill to raise the proficiency on the decent equipment, the max durability of every last one of them was 1. Items with 1 durability were recyclable items that weren’t even worth a few coppers. He couldn’t complain even if the price was set by weight like junk.

Even so...

‘It’s five days. I hunted for five days without rest and all for just 10 gold?’

On top of that, Ark had used up one deluxe repair toolbox while hunting because he couldn’t even consider touching his Magic equipment with beginner Magic Restoration yet.

In the end that meant he’d spent 15 gold on repair fee. Wasn’t it a 5 gold deficit rather than a profit? If he nitpicked the break-even point, he had to receive at least 20 gold for the numbers to be right.

But for it to be 10 gold instead of 20 gold!

‘Aack, for the result of hunting like crazy to be a deficit...’

It wringed his heart.

Ark sold the mantle and warrior equipment not long ago, bringing a fortune of 7,000,000 won (~\$7,000) into his hands. But the reason those items were expensive was because they were much harder to acquire. He’d have nothing more to wish for if that kind of good luck kept up, but reality wasn’t that easy.

Rather than hoping for a jackpot, it was a little more realistic to systematically collect money through japtem, and the majority of users did use such method in order to save money. For a user, 1 gold was a colossal fortune.

But a deficit? Was it a sound that could even be possible?

Ark made his most servile expression and pleaded, “Can’t you please pay me a little more?”

“So you acknowledge the fact that it honestly doesn’t reach the market price. However, I’m planning to clear the store soon and leave the village. To be honest, even if I purchase goods right now, it’ll only become baggage, you see. If you don’t want to sell, don’t; I’ll have no regrets.”

It didn’t work, as expected. Since it was a village he’d come to for the first time, intimacy was 0. Haggling was impossible from the beginning.

If it was a store in Jackson Castle where he’d accumulated intimacy through trades, he would’ve received at least 10~20 percent more. If you considered

the market value with the rarity value on top of that, he'd be able to receive over 2 times more. But he couldn't just take his baggage and return to Jackson to get 10 more gold either.

Ark held in his tears and nodded.

“I understand. Please take care of all of it.”

“You thought well. You should know too, but since there's no village in the area... huh! N-no way? Isn't this Grizzly Gnoll's leather?”

“So you do recognize it.”

Ark pricked his ears, quickly approached, and repeatedly rubbed his hands together.

“That's the leather of a monster I defeated with enormous difficulty. The bastards were so strong, every time I fought them one by one, I really had to overcome a life-or-death crisis. Honestly it's nothing short of being a miracle that I've survived till now. Isn't it a bit too much to buy this leather that I earned with such suffering by weight? Ah, since you said you were thinking of clearing the store, I do not hope for much either. I just ask that you think of my pains, so a little more...”

“Are you saying you defeated it?”

“Of course.”

“Th-then are you perhaps saying you've crossed the Argus Mountains?”

“Yes, I didn’t know the road so I crossed the mountains. Why do you ask?”

“That’s surprising. Although those guys don’t travel alone.... for you to cross over such a place with your solitary strength. It seems you’re a more impressive adventurer than I thought. Perhaps...”

The store owner stared at Ark with newfound eyes.

“If it’s true that you defeated the Gnolls, I’ll purchase your goods for 20 gold.”

“Re-really?”

“In return, won’t you listen to my request?”

Ark’s mouth stretched to his ears.

‘An NPC’s request! In other words, it’s a quest!’

He was so happy he could die with just receiving more, but for him to give even a quest!

This village was still a place users didn’t know. In other words, a quest no one knew about. The reward aside, simply the fact that he had discovered a quest such as this made his heart leap.

Ark quickly nodded his head and the store owner continued with a serious expression.

“Actually, this village is a village still unknown to the outside, and was set up

by several pioneers. Though it's just a barren place situated at the foot of a mountain, it was judged that if the village was developed and roads were made, there was a possibility for it could grow as a relay point between Jackson and commercial cities.”

The store owner’s name was Galen, he was one among the first pioneers. Galen continued with a miserable voice.

“Everything was satisfactory in the beginning. We did worry because there were a lot of monsters, but we had a noble leader by the name of Lancel. He was a mercenary with a lot of experience, so most monsters weren’t even a match. We united with him as the center and completed the village. I still can’t forget the emotions people had then. Everyone else was so happy, they wept tears.”

“But the people in the village looked like there wasn’t any vitality.”

“That’s right, all of it was because of the Gnoll bastards.”

“The Gnolls?”

“Originally there weren’t Gnolls in this area, but the Gnolls immigrated here as a group from somewhere. Then they situated themselves in a cave deep within the mountains as their center. So the dream of fostering the village as a relay point for trade by making roads in the area crumbled apart. Rather, the Gnolls’ raids made us tremble in fear every day.”

“Did you not think of trying to ask for help?”

“Of course we thought about it. However, this is a village with only a dozen

people who put their lives on the line and developed it. We couldn't afford to hire many mercenaries or the like. And Lancel was still alive and well then."

"He *was* alive and well....?"

Galen shook his head with a dark expression.

"Lancel was a truly noble warrior. He repulsed the Gnolls raiding the village multiple times. However, Lancel, who judged himself as someone who couldn't save the village, believed he had to gather the village residents, find the cave personally, and settle the matter with the Gnolls. We also believed if it was Lancel, he could definitely do it, so we didn't doubt. But there was a trap even Lancel hadn't foresaw waiting for him inside the cave."

"A trap?"

"I don't know whether the Gnolls were raising them, but there was an enormous number of snakes inside the cave. It was a number enough to be labeled as disgusting. In the end, we were hit by the surprise attacks of the Gnolls and the snakes, and we were driven out. But Lancel didn't give up until the end. He went inside and fighting bravely. For several hours, there were resounding roars which shook the cave. However... our heroic Lancel did not return."

"He was a noble person."

"Yes, he was a warrior more valiant than anyone."

Galen let out a sigh.

"In any case, after what had happened, the residents left the village one by

one. They can't be blamed. They witnessed a horrible swarm of snakes, and even their leader Lancel died, so they must have lost the courage to go on. Although it's a village we established with hard work, it was not more precious than their lives. I've endured and came this far, but I was thinking that any longer would be too much."

"Will it do if I clear out the Gnolls' cave for you?"

"Wi-will you help?"

"Of course I will. I am an adventurer, after all. How could I ignore this?"

"I've said this earlier, but I can't give many rewards."

"I know. Since it's something where I have to put my life on the line, it would be a lie to say I don't want any reward, but I never help to hope for a large reward. It's fine if you just give me your whole-hearted sincerity."

Ark insinuated the meaning of asking for the maximum of what could be given.

A Gnoll was a monster good to hunt at his current level.

Since it was mostly a party monster, he received a lot of experience from them too. If he was going to hunt it anyways, of course it was better to get a quest and hunt it.

This was exactly what it meant to kill two birds with one stone.

Galen, who had no reason to know this kind of intention, spoke with a deeply moved expression,

“Thank you. Then let’s do this. If you defeat Gnolls inside the cave and bring me their leather, I’ll pay 20 silver for each one. And if by any possibility you defeat all the Gnolls in the cave and bring peace to the village, I give you another 10 gold as compensation to your success. Of course, it’s probably not enough of a reward compared to the danger, but that’s the most I can do.”

“How many Gnolls are there?”

“We don’t know well either. However, we think there are probably about one hundred.”

‘20 silvers for each one! One hundred of them is 20 gold!’

Ark vaguely heard the sound of jingling coins in his ear. It was definitely not an ample compensation, but it wasn’t that small a reward either. Level 40 monster leather normally sold for about 5 silvers in stores. But Galen had offered 4 times that price. Given it was a mountain village quest, it was a preposterous offer.

‘If you add the success compensation 10 gold on top of that, it’s not a small amount of money!’

“I’m sorry, but I can’t give you compensation concerning the snakes. Can I entrust it to you nevertheless?”

“Do not worry and entrust it to me. It’s certain I was guided to this place in order to do this job.”

Ark clasped Galen’s hands firmly as he replied with an expression brimming with confidence.

With a simultaneous thu-thu-thump a quest window popped up.

Pioneer Village Lancel's Misfortune

You have discovered a pioneer village still unknown to the world at the end of your long journey.

As a village made after several years of effort by pioneers who followed the admired the mercenary leader Lancel, it was named 'Lancel' after the name of their leader. They wished for Lancel to flourish as a relay point between Jackson and commercial cities.

But as a group of Gnolls lead numerous snakes and settled in a nearby cave, all their efforts had gone to waste. The residents put their lives on the line and organized a punitive expedition. However, the village's hero, Lancel, was the sole sacrifice.

Most of the despairing villagers have left the villages, and now only total desolation is left in the village. Nevertheless, Galen wants to somehow save the village, so he has requested you to subjugate the Gnolls. Galen has promised a bounty of 20 silvers per Gnoll leather, and a 10 gold compensation for your successful subjugation. You must defeat the Gnolls and save Lancel Village from despair.

Difficulty: C

Hatching

‘Found it!’

He saw the cave entrance through the overgrown forest.

When he received the quest in Lancel, the location was displayed on his map. It wasn’t far from the village. Ark left Lancel after organizing his bags and arrived at the destination in only an hour.

Two Gnolls were standing guard at the entrance of the cave. They were slightly different from the Gnolls he had hunted until now as they were wearing shabby leather armor. It was likely they were about 1 or 2 levels higher than him. But he had hunted Gnolls until he was sick of it. Though their levels were slightly higher, they weren’t a match for Ark.

“Grrrr, isn’t there some kind of smell?”

"Sniff, sniff. I was thinking the same thing."

"It smells like a human... Are there still humans lingering nearby?"

“Let’s catch him and make him into a sacrifice.”

Perhaps because they had dog heads, Gnolls had a keen sense of smell.

The Gnolls raised their spears and, with their noses quivering, approached Ark’s location.

At that moment, Ark jumped out from behind the bushes.

“You bitches are the sacrifice. Bat, go!”

Bat shot towards the Gnolls like an arrow that had been loosed from a bow. With a *pa-thump* sound, the Gnoll who had been struck on the bridge of its nose tumbled to the ground. The other Gnoll was alarmed and thrust its spear

towards Bat.

But the Bat who had his summon cancelled and then recast was already sitting on Ark's shoulder.

"Eyes of the Cat! There isn't time. We're going with plan A!"

Ark, Skull, and Bat sprang forward in a flash and concentrated their attack on the stumbling Gnoll.

They had become familiar with Gnolls through battles, so predicting their movements was easy.

Even before the Gnoll moved, Ark made evasive movements and let loose a chain of sword attacks. As a critical hit and co-op attack bonus erupted in succession, the Gnoll died before it was able to properly thrust its spear even once.

The Gnoll staggered and charged in, but instead it received several counterattacks, lost 80 percent of its health, and ran away terrified. The Gnoll was consumed by fear and ran away frightened. But Bat rushed forward to block its path, and when Skull tore into its leg, it fell to the ground again.

Double critical chance!

"Gaaah!"

The Gnoll received a strike to the heart and disappeared with a moan.

As the Gnoll disappeared it dropped a leather.

"Huhuhu, it's too easy, and this is 20 Silvers a piece?"

A smile spread across Ark's lips as he held on to two pieces of leather.

20 Silver a piece, so it was an item worth 2,000 Won (~\$2). He was literally

picking up bills that had fallen to the ground, how could he not be happy.

“Master, those eyes are creepy.”

“Shut up, what do you know? One of these leathers can become a full sushi roll! That’s an entire meal.”

“Sushi roll? What’s that?”

“It’s nothing. Cut the small talk and do the recon well,” Ark snorted as he entered the cave.

When he stepped foot in the cave, an information window popped up with a booming roar.

Ghastly Snake Lair

At the edge of the Argus Mountains, you have found a cave emanating a ghastly aura. The chilling aura you can feel from the cold blood flowing through these reptiles and an eerie smell permeates the entire cave. The noise of dogs barking can be heard from the depths of the cave, and slithering sounds are flowing from the small holes drilled everywhere.

There is no way to guess how many Gnolls and Snakes are inhabiting the cave. If you are someone with the wisdom to avoid danger, you will never enter this cave.

You have discovered an undiscovered dungeon. Because this is a newly found discovery, if you register your discovery in the Hall of Fame, you can gain an additional 700 experience and 50 Fame.

Would you like to register it?

“Registration refused.”

Of course, Ark had absolutely no intention to share the information.

After refusing the registration, he entered the cave and found himself in darkness.

He would have hated it in the past, but presently Ark was a Dark Walker.

The dark was Ark’s irreplaceable weapon and armor. Outside when it turned night time, Gnolls’ stats rose by 30 percent. As a result, even though Ark’s stats also rose, Gnolls were still stronger.

But right now it was daytime. So only Ark was strengthened from the cave’s darkness. His strength was replenished and he felt his five senses becoming extremely sharp. Also, using ‘Stealth’ in the darkness would further improve Ark’s chance of survival.

Dungeons were environments where Dark Walkers can display 100 percent of their abilities!

With Gnolls, even if five or six of them flocked together, he had the confidence to win easily.

“Master, four dog heads are gathered in front of us.”

Bat, who had left to survey the surroundings, reported its findings.

“Good, you guys stay here and move when I give the signal. ‘Stealth!’”

When Ark used the Dark Walker’s special ability, he was absorbed into the darkness and disappeared. While maintaining this state, Ark walked into the interior of the cave. Just as Bat had reported, about 200 meters ahead, four Gnolls had gathered and were whispering.

“We’ve run out of sacrifices. Grrr.”

“This is a big problem. God will be angry.”

“We have to storm into the village and catch a human.”

“After the humans came, God got really angry.”

“Will there still be humans in the village?”

“Even if we have to go far away, we have to capture some. If we don’t, we might get caught and be eaten.”

‘God? He’ll catch and eat them?’

He was wondering what they were talking about, but the Gnolls’ conversation ended there.

“Shh, this is strange. For some reason I can smell human.”

“Have humans come again? That’s good then...”

The Gnolls’ eyes gleamed as they looked around.

Ark went to stand behind one them and sent Bat a signal through telepathy.

‘Pretend to be a human.’

Since the Familiars were spiritually connected to Ark, communication without words was possible.

Bat received the signal and dropped pebbles as it flew around. Then the Gnolls flinched and looked away. At that instant, Ark cast Eyes of the Cat and stabbed one in the nape.

- Critical strike! Backstab effect has increased damage by 200%. The Gnoll will be stunned for 10 seconds.

Backstab effects were applied when an unexpected surprise attack from behind was dealt! It was an attack often used by Thieves who could use ‘Stealth’.

With a single strike, the Gnoll’s health dropped by 50 percent.

With a rapidfire-like attack, Ark attacked the stunned Gnoll’s weak points. After attacking the weak points exposed by Eyes of the Cat, the Gnoll collapsed without being able to attack properly.

Once ‘Stealth’ was lifted, the Gnolls roared savagely.

“It’s a Human!”

“It’s a sacrifice! Let’s offer the sacrifice. Grrr!”

The Gnolls didn't even notice the death of their comrade.

They ran forward wildly swinging rusted spears, swords and the like.

“Bat, charge! Skull, Plan B. Support Bat!”

Following Ark's commands, Skull and Bat charged towards a Gnoll.

When Bat violently rammed into the back of the Gnoll's head, it yelled as it turned around.

Bat was wise. While maintaining the proper distance from the wildly charging Gnoll, he led it far away from Ark. Bat surrounded the Gnoll with Skull and ravaged it by nipping at it from both sides.

There were two Gnolls left!

‘If there's two of them, it's worth trying!’

Ark deflected the swords and thrust himself between the Gnolls.

The experience he had gained from fighting hundreds of Gnolls became Ark's strength.

New World's graphics was more realistic than reality.

When the Gnolls swung their spears, their bloodshot eyes as they faced him, the movement of their muscles, and even the swelling of their beating chests with every breath, was perfectly implemented.

If it was a monster he was encountering for the first time, it wouldn't be easy to predict its movements by little things. The muscle movement was different for each monster.

But after facing countless battles, with just the movements of a Gnoll's muscles, he could tell where they were thinking of stabbing.

Of course, it wasn't something anyone could do.

Taekwondo was a martial arts where the outcome of a battle was decided in close proximity with the speed of an instant. If one light step or the movement of a shoulder was missed, a person could be defeated in the blink of an eye. The concentration and keenness of threading the eye of a needle was necessary. Also, you wouldn't be able to make the deciding blow if you can't read your opponent's breathing and strike at the right moment. This was a technique that required a high degree of actual combat experience.

There were people who said the modern time usage of Taekwondo in actual combat had fallen. But it was a consequence of Taekwondo becoming world-renowned Martial Arts. As it became more renowned, there was more research done on it in order to systematically develop methods for dealing with it.

By no means had Taekwondo become weaker.

In the 1970s, throughout North America, Africa, and elsewhere, Taekwondo received praise as the invincible Martial Art. Even the gangs of Harlem showed respect to a Taekwondo Master!

Ark had been training with Taekwondo for years.

In addition, Taekwondo had more sparring than other martial arts. It wasn't an exaggeration to say he was an expert in reading his opponent's intentions.

'The upper right!'

Ark tilted his upper body and deflected the spear.

Simultaneously, a red spot emerged on the Gnoll's side. The weak points identified by Eyes of the Cat weren't just for show. In this situation, it was the strongest strike available and it was in a blind spot difficult to defend! The area Ark had predicted coincided with it.

Before the spots were revealed, Ark's sword was already piercing through a spot.

- Critical
Strike!

While staggering, the Gnoll fell backwards.

Taking a single step, Ark twisted in the air and threw out a kick.

It was a habit formed in his movements when he was still unfamiliar with dual-blade combat.

As he reached intermediate in Dual-Blade Combat, all his movements were slickly connected. But it wasn't easy. In fact Ark, who had begun his training once more, had lost the kinesthetic sense needed to perform an advanced

technique like a mid-air roundhouse kick fluidly.

In New World one's stat bonuses were added to their natural strength.

Here, the bonus of an intermediate level Dual-Blade Combat was applied to the technique's success rate and power. The sharpness wasn't comparable to reality.

With a "chop" sound, he attacked the back of his enemy's head.

The Dual-Blade Combat's effects were similar to Taekwondo's points system.

Dual-Blade Combat (Intermediate, Passive 163/300): As the understanding of the technique increases, speed and accuracy will also rise. Grants additional damage to all types of swords and knuckle-related weapons, and dramatically increases evasion and critical hit rate.

General attack power is increased by 30%. When a shield is equipped, Dual-Blade Combat's effect disappears.

* Additional Effects. When a kick hits the target, a random status effect occurs, with a probability of 5% for small monsters, 3% for average monsters, and 1% for large monsters. When a very difficult technique is successful, the probability also increases.

A very difficult attack. So if a techniques like a flying kick or a double kick hits the target, there is a greater probability of an additional effect, such as a knock down or stun, will be inflicted. This effect was not available when he first reached the intermediate level, it was only available after he had gained 150 points, so as he gains more points, probability will also grow.

The difficulty of a mid-air roundhouse kick was of the highest level!

The Gnoll received a stun hex and stumbled.

Ark followed it up with jumping crescent kicks!

He took turns attacking both sides of the Gnoll while switching kicks. After which, he unsheathed Dark Blade. The Gnoll was defeated by a stream of continuous attacks that were truly like a typhoon as it moaned in vain. Then, the Gnoll behind him thrust its spear towards his back.

Ark twisted his hips and let the spear fly past his side. When the newly formed stat, flexibility was applied, the damage was reduced. Then his kicks and sword strikes emanated like a storm!

“Grrrr, this, this Human.....!”

The Gnoll let out a voice of disbelief, as if he couldn't believe Ark's incredible skills.

Ark was actually a little surprised.

‘My body is light as a feather!’

Sometimes while training martial arts, one experiences an awakening event.

There are times when a usual failing technique suddenly succeeds, or a feeling when nerves get extremely sensitive, which allows you to completely see through your opponent's attack.

It was Ark's current state.

Since starting the game, he had been training his Taekwondo without resting for even a day so he was recovering his sense from the past. With his abilities raised from the darkness within the cave, he was able to exert power even surprising himself!

Klock!

The Gnoll who was struck in its abdomen by Ark's side kicks, flew threw several meters in the air and then crashed into the ground. It raised its body while staggering, but at the next blow struck the back of its head and it fell once again.

When the battle against the two Gnolls first began, it already only had 40 percent of its health left.

Falling down for the third time, the Gnoll was consumed by fear.

“Str-Strong!”

However, Ark got momentarily careless due to his heart-pounding vigor, the Gnoll suddenly blew a whistle.

‘This is bad. Did it call its comrades?’

“Bat, Skull! Stop him, make it so he can't blow that whistle!”

But before Ark's finished issuing his command, a sharp sound echoed

throughout the cave.

It was then when the cave began to shake.

Ark was the first one who smelled something fishy.

A fishy smell so strong, it paralyzed his sense of smell the moment something poured and writhed from the small holes drilled into the cave like a honeycomb.

It was hundreds of snakes!

It was another danger of the cave Galen had warned him about. No matter how good of a swordsman you are, it isn't an easy task to fight against hundreds of snakes.

However, Ark only let out a sigh of relief.

'Fortunately he wasn't calling for his comrades. If the opponents are snakes I'll welcome them.'

"Spirit of the Cat!"

Nyaaaa -!

A sharp cry swept through the inside of the cave.

At the same time, the illusion of a huge black cat rose above Ark's head. As its glittering golden eyes slowly opened, the snakes who had been making threatening sounds were left paralyzed.

The paralysis effect for small monsters!

The Gnoll screamed, “Kyaa, it— it’s a monster!”

“That isn’t something someone with a dog’s head should say!”

Ark ran forward while treading on the snakes and defeated the Gnoll.

He then dispatched the stiffened snakes at random.

“Ooh, master. For some reason you look especially strong today.”

Bat and Skull’s expressions were filled with energy.

The snakes’ paralysis soon wore off, but he didn’t need to worry.

Though the paralysis wore off, the effects of Spirit of the Cat lowered small monsters’ attack and defence by 30 percent. On the other hand, the Cat Knight title Ark had received meant he also received a bonus in attack and critical hit rate against small monsters and damage taken from them was reduced.

It wasn’t an exaggeration to say Ark was invincible when facing small smonsters. That was the reason he didn’t care about the snakes when he accepted the quest.

‘Huhuhu, if it’s snakes it doesn’t matter if it’s a hundred or a thousand.’

Whenever Ark swung his sword, three or four snakes were sliced into pieces.

On the other hand, the damage he received was just 1. Ark defeated hundreds of snakes as if he was trampling on worms.

‘The quest’s difficulty being C was probably because of these snakes.’

Truly, if it had been any other user, even if their levels were a lot higher than Ark, they wouldn’t have been able to face such a tough fight with snakes as their opponents. No, they wouldn’t have even dared to enter this cave. But for Ark, who had the title of Cat Knight, snakes and such things didn’t even count as snacks.

The only thing he had to worry about was the poison that was sometimes inflicted. But since he only lost 50 Health in 30 seconds, it wasn’t a very strong poison. He just needed to make food with detoxification effects through Survival Cooking after the battle ends and eat it, so it wasn’t a problem.

‘This is a smorgasbord of a quest!’

There were no difficulties for Ark who was full of confidence.

While he wove his way left and right through the cave, he hunted down and defeated all the Gnolls he set his sight on.

‘This place really is a moneytree!’

A joyful cry unconsciously burst out of him.

To Ark, the Gnolls no longer appeared as monsters.

He saw them as if they were 2,000 won bills or a moving roll of sushi that had come to life.

Whenever Ark saw a Gnoll, he rushed towards them while drooling.

“UHUHUHU, MORE, SEND OUT MORE!”

“M-Master. Calm down, your eyes look really dangerous.”

Clack clack clack.

Bat and Skull, who had been very excited, were now trembling in fear.

When the Gnolls were driven into a corner, they had always called on the snakes, but to Ark it was nothing more than a bonus game.

Ark defeated a hundred Gnolls in just two hours.

“With a hundred, I’ve made 20 gold!”

If possible, he wanted to spend a few days hunting inside the cave.

However, perhaps because he had received the quest, the Gnolls didn’t regenerate even after he went back to the entrance.

Well, if he returned after hunting about a thousand of them, Galen, a mountain village store owner, would probably be unable to afford the reward money and go bankrupt.

In the end, the cave's Gnolls were almost completely annihilated by the merciless Ark.

Ark crossed through the deserted cave and headed into its deepest depths.

A hole with no end in sight gaped at the end of the cave, and at its center, there was a jagged, altar-like protrusion.

A totem resembling the shape of a snake had been placed on top of the altar.

As unfortunate as it was, the three Gnolls gathered in that area were the last ones.

Ark hid his body with 'Stealth' and went closer.

'Is he the Gnolls' boss?'

One unusually dressed Gnoll caught his eye.

He was draped in a rag-like robe, and atop his head was a crown that appeared to be woven with tree roots. However for a boss-level monster, he didn't look particularly strong.

'He's still a boss. I don't know what kind of attacks he'll try.'

"Grrr, what the hell happened? Have you still not captured the invading Human?"

"Th-that's... the bastard is stronger than we thought."

“Even though we let the snakes loose, we weren’t able to kill him.”

“Grrr, we won’t be able to appease the God’s fury like this.”

The Boss Gnoll trembled with a frightened expression.

“God was wounded by the Human who entered awhile ago and is furious. If we allow another human to approach.... Grrr, in any case, we must stop the Human.”

“Understood.”

The Gnolls who had received the command lifted their weapons and neared Ark’s location.

Ark stayed far away and waited for his opportunity.

When he judged the distance between him and the Boss had widened considerably, he approached at mach speed and attacked one Gnoll with a Backstab.

The Gnolls were immediately bewildered and the line of battle was disrupted. Once Bat and Skull pitched in, the fight was decided in an instant.

“Ho-how could this be! When did the Human come all the way here... grrr!” The Boss Gnoll burst out in shock as the Gnoll guards were defeated without a proper fight.

“Come on, you dog head!”

Now the only one left was the Boss Gnoll.

Ark leveled his sword as he prepared for the enemy's attack.

But the Boss Gnoll didn't come to attack Ark.

Instead, it hastily fled towards the altar, and while shaking the snake-shaped totem he began to recite a strange incantation.

“Nunak, nanak, sandalani! Great King of Snakes!”

‘What the hell is he doing?’

While perplexed, Ark rushed towards the Boss Gnoll.

No, the rush was only for an instant.

The cave suddenly began shaking and something enormous abruptly rose from beneath the cliff. It was a huge monster making a hissing sound as its eyes flashed... Its identity was a snake with a body width appearing to be several meters wide.

A warning message popped up in front of him.

- The boss monster Kundalini
has appeared!

“Gulp! W-What is this?”

Ark was petrified.

Ark was no longer a beginner at virtual games.

Whether he saw a wolf, a rat the size of a bear, or a zombie with its flesh decaying, he didn't even blink. But the giant snake that appeared before his eyes, Kundalini, was cut from a different cloth than those monsters.

His felt shivers go down his spine as he faced the hatred mixed with distinctive bloodthirst the snake exuded. Ice-cold sweat poured out of him like a waterfall and flowed down his back.

The will to fight that buoyed him also cooled.

“Ooooh, my God! King of Snakes! Punish the human!”

Once Kundalini emerged, the Boss Gnoll let out a cheer. They were the Boss Gnoll's last words.

Snap *CRUNCH!*

Kundalini moved with incredible speed and swallowed the Boss Gnoll down.

Its jaw convulsed as it munched on the crushed Boss Gnoll, and blood gushed out. Kundalini gulped down the Boss Gnoll and raised its head. The several-metered snake raised its head as blood dripped from its mouth in the darkness!

Rooooar!

‘HOLY SHIT!’

A moan unconsciously escaped him.

The visual impact was enormous.

Ark felt like he was watching a terrible horror movie.

Kundalini's gaze turned towards Ark. They were eyes of a predator staring at him as its prey, not an enemy.

'Was this the reason why the difficulty was C?'

He had been severely mistaken. Ark didn't have to worry about something like a snake. Rather, it was an enormous demon that couldn't even be called a snake.

Kundalini slowly glided across the floor, approaching Ark as if there was no need to hurry.

'Th-the hell is this?'

Bewilderment escaped Ark's mouth.

He tried to raise his sword, but his arm wouldn't move. His legs didn't budge either, as if they were rooted to the ground.

- You looked into Kundalini's eyes, inducing the complete effect of Forestallment. If you are inflicted with Forestallment, you will always be denied First Strike. Until you are attacked, the effect will not disappear.

‘First Strike? I’ll be swallowed in one strike, so what kind of damned First Strike is this!’

To give up the First Strike to a demon who swallowed the Boss Gnoll in one bite, didn’t it mean he was just prey? It really was a bamboozling skill for a bamboozling body.

Kundalini surreptitiously narrowed the gap as it yawned open its cavernous mouth. Ark couldn’t even move a muscle.

Just like a frog being captured by a snake, Ark could only stare with dazed eyes at the inside of Kundalini’s crimson mouth. In the instant its mouth was about to touch him, a red light suddenly flashed before him.

It was Skull.

At the very moment Kundalini was about to devour Ark whole, Skull rammed Ark.

Clack, cla-clack!

As Skull clattered, it disappeared into Kundalini’s stomach instead of Ark.

“Sku-Skull!”

“What are you doing, Master! Get yourself together!”

As the belated Familiar recall damage registered, he was shocked back into his senses. Once the effect of Forestallment disappeared, the horror that crushed his body disappeared like a dream.

‘That’s right, this is virtual reality. Even a huge snake like this is just EXP was prepared for the sake of the users. There’s no reason why I can’t win. No, I will win!’

“Eyes of the Cat!”

Kundalini’s information window popped up as he cast the skill.

When he checked the information, he sucked in his breath. Ark’s level had risen once inside the cave, so it was currently 46. On the other hand, Kundalini was a whopping level 80.

Even if he included the advantages he had in the dark, there was still a difference of 30 levels. This wasn’t an opponent he could defeat by any regular means.

However, there was no need give up yet.

‘Kundalini only had 50 percent of its health remaining!’

Ark immediately saw why.

There were exceptionally large red weak points marked on Kundalini’s forehead, and in the middle was a single sword was deeply lodged in.

Numerous thoughts instantaneously combined inside Ark’s head.

‘It’s Lancel! It’s Lancel’s sword!’

Galen said Lancel had gone to the end of the cave alone. And after several hours, deafening roars had erupted.

There had also been a hint about Lancel within the Gnolls' conversation. They'd said an invading Human had inflicted a wound on the God awhile ago which made God sensitive.

So Lancel had faced Kundalini here, alone.

Lancel had been defeated without reaching his goal, but with his will, he had protected the village, and its residents were still living and breathing. The sword lodged in Kundalini's forehead was his will!

A scene of a Warrior fighting desperately against a huge snake painted itself in front of Ark's eyes.

'You're awesome, Lancel!'

Courage surged in him like an erupting volcano.

'Alright! I will inherit your goal!'

Although the monster was level 80, it was a different story when its health was already down to half.

'It's ridiculous if I don't win after all the arrangements have been made for me!'

Ark swung his sword like lightning and struck a red weak point.

Ba-ba-baang!

Kundalini staggered with the sounds of impact. But it wasn't that easy to close the 30 level gap. Even though he'd dealt a critical hit, Kundalini's Health decreased by just 2 percent.

Kundalini began its counter attack.

The thick tail curved like a whip as it flew forward.

When he rolled on the ground and avoided it, the cave walls were hit so it began to crack and shake.

It had power so outrageous, it wouldn't even allow him to block!

'I'll have to put my all into avoiding its attack!'

"Bat, attract its attention."

"Dammit, you always give me the hard jobs!"

Bat wailed its complaint as it hung in front of Kundalini's nose.

The accuracy of Kundalini's attacks dropped. It had no time to properly concentrate on Ark, so it randomly swung its tail.

Ark waited until the tail was right in front of his nose, then rolled on the ground and stabbed it with his sword. He didn't have the luxury of aiming for something like a critical hit.

Although he wasn't dealing much damage to it now, it was all he could do to steadily chip off its Health.

Once he made up his mind and evaded, Kundalini's attacks were slower than expected. The sword wedged in its forehead was probably also influencing Kundalini's stats. However, even Ark couldn't avoid all the attacks.

KA-POW--!

“Ugh!”

Ark was pushed back several meters.

From just one slam of the tail, he lost 400 Health and he was poisoned. Almost only half of his Health remained.

In other words, it would be game over if he took just one more attack. Moreover, he had only touched the tail, yet he was poisoned and his Health was being steadily eaten away. With an attack of this level, it would be no use even if he was to drink a potion.

If he took an attack while drinking four recovery potions, which cost 100 Gold each, he would incur a loss instead.

‘No matter how slowed Kundalini’s movements are, considering the level difference, I can’t avoid it forever. I can’t help but be hit by one attack every five. And the poison is stronger than regular snakes by 3 or 4 times. The battle will get worse the longer it goes on! Some kind of decisive strike...’

Ark’s eyes turned towards the sword wedged in its forehead.

A bigger red point than any other!

That was likely Kundalini's decisive weakness!

'I have no choice, I'll have to risk it!'

Ark made up his mind and quickly commanded, "Bat, attract its attention upwards!"

"Got it, Master! Up here, you big worm body!"

Bat flew rapidly in front of Kundalini's eyes and soared up. The moment Kundalini's attention turned upward, Ark flung forward and clambered onto its back.

The snake was several meters wide.

Ark ran up Kundalini's back while displaying the sense of balance honed by Taekwondo. When he climbed up to its neck, Kundalini sensed Ark's intention and fiercely raised its neck.

As the slope became vertical, Ark slid down.

"No way!"

Ark flung himself forward and stabbed his sword into its jaw.

Kundalini lowered its neck again and a heavy noise of impact burst out. At that moment, Ark crawled up Kundalini's neck and stood on its head. Then

he put all his strength in one strike towards the forehead.

“Dark Blade!”

- You do not have enough Mana!

“Dammit it!”

Ark screamed at the unimaginable pop up message.

The chronic dilemma that had plagued him, lack of Mana, reared its ugly head in the most decisive moment.

Ark had only used Eyes of the Cat once at the start of the battle. But grating away Kundalini's Health had consumed too much time. Because he had steadily used up Mana while sustaining Bat's summon. He only had 80 Mana left.

It had been 7 minutes since the start of his fight with Kundalini. The Mana he'd used was 420.

If Skull hadn't been forcefully recalled earlier, Bat would have already returned to the Netherworld. Ark had forgotten about this fact because he'd never fought this long with them before.

'Stupid! How could I have not checked the amount of Mana I had left!'

It was an absurd mistake.

ROOOAAR!

While Ark exploded in embarrassment, Kundalini began to glow.

Ark groaned as he clutched the sword stuck in the writhing Kundalini's forehead.

'Damn, is it really going to end like this?'

Bat would return to the Netherworld in 80 seconds.

He couldn't use his deadly Dark Blade, either.

Kundalini's remaining Health was 30 percent. A win wasn't guaranteed even if he used Dark Blade three or four times, but he couldn't even use it once! Even if attacked it with at least a dozen normal critical hits, the remaining Health wouldn't be depleted.

Of course, Kundalini wouldn't just let itself be hit, either.

A way to win didn't emerge no matter what. It would be game over if he let go of the sword he was holding onto. Even if he wasn't eaten by Kundalini, he would die instantly if he fell into the chasm with no bottom in sight that yawned underneath him.

Suddenly, an idea flashed across Ark's mind.

'That's right, I may not be able to win, but there's a way to die together!'

Ark opted for this final idea.

Fortunately, before he left Lancel village, he had set it to be his resurrection place. Then even if he died here, he didn't have to worry about returning to Jackson. Dying together with Kundalini was one method.

If he hurried and returned to the cave, he could still get the Kundalini's dropped loot. Since he could complete the quest on top of that, it was worth penalty.

'That's the most I can do right now!'

The problem was *how* they could die together.

"Bat, lure it towards the chasm!" Ark shouted as he hung from Kundalini's head.

"Understood, Master. Hey you!"

GRAAAWR!

Bat stabbed Kundalini's eye and fled towards the chasm.

Ark clutched onto the sword hilt and was wrenched around; when Kundalini arrived at the edge, he stabbed the forehead with his sword with all his strength.

As he landed a critical hit, Kundalini grated its body against the wall. He was wedged between the wall and Kundalini's body, so his Health dropped steadily. But Ark didn't stop and stabbed his sword two, three times in succession.

His tenacity called forth a miracle.

Having writhed against the wall, Kundalini couldn't balance its weight and slid towards the cliff. The bottomless pit gaped underneath it.

"I did it!"

Ark clenched his eyes shut.

He experienced a peculiar sense of floating.

A few seconds, or perhaps minutes flowed past. Then Kundalini crashed into the ground and he felt an enormous shock. Kundalini, who had received a huge amount of damage from falling, had its Health sucked out, leaving only 3 percent.

'What? How am I still alive?'

Ark was stunned.

Even Kundalini's incredible Health had been decreased by over 20 percent. Then Ark, who only had about 300 of his Health left, should have died instantly. However, Ark was still alive.

He had just 20 Health left, but he wasn't dead.

Just then, a message window popped up before Ark's eyes.

Due to Cat Knight's ability, falling damage has been reduced by 50 percent. Effect of Flexibility while rolling has also reduced falling damage by 30 percent.

‘It’s a chance!’

Ark’s eyes flashed.

Cat Knight had reduced his falling damage! An ability that he hadn’t cared about until now had activated in a desperately dangerous moment.

Also, thanks to the Taekwondo he had trained every single day since starting the game, he had automatically attempted to roll in the moment of impact.

As a result, Ark slid past 80 percent of damage and survived.

‘I don’t have time to waste. The poison wasn’t cured, so my Health is still dropping.’

Ark sprang up.

Perhaps it was because of the falling damage, but his body didn’t move properly. However, Kundalini, who had received 100 percent of the falling damage, hadn’t even gathered its senses yet.

Kundalini was stretched out panting as its body glowed red.

Double critical chance!

“Die!”

With Bat, Ark plunged his sword toward Kundalini's forehead. It was a single strike enveloped with the effects of Undying Will and Indomitable Body as well as the double critical chance.

Through double critical chance, you have landed two critical hits. As a co-op bonus, 30 percent of damage is added.

“ROOAAAR!”

Kundalini's forehead, which had taken massive damage, split right in half.

Kundalini, which writhed like a fish out of water, slowly disappeared.

You have defeated the boss monster Kundalini.

Your level has increased.

You have gained 2 levels, so your current level is now 48.

Ark heaved coarse breaths as he flopped to the ground.

“Huff huff huff.”

"Ma-master! We won! We won!"

Only after hearing Bat's shout did Ark realize that he had won.

Ark forcefully subdued his trembling excitement and pulled out his pot. After making an urgent antidote, he made food that recovered Health. His Health had dropped to the bottom, so he finally recovered after making and eating food three, four times.

The sword that had been lodged in its forehead and a skull had fallen where Kundalini had disappeared.

Lancel's Sword (Cursed)

This is the sword used by Lancel, the leader of Lancel Village. It's a sword that gives off such a gloomy feeling that you can't believe that it was a sword used by a normal mercenary.

Additionally, the sword became strongly cursed after being wedged in Kundalini's forehead and saturated by poison for a long time.

Until the curse is lifted, you cannot check its stats.

Lancel's Remains

The remains of the Lancel Village leader, Lancel.

Disappointment floated across Ark's face.

A cursed item was a kind of unidentified item. But it was harder to use than an unidentified item. An unidentified item could be checked after paying a certain amount of money to a user in a big city, but lifting a curse was only possible at a cathedral in the capital city of Schudenberg Kingdom.

That meant it was an item that he couldn't even use until he arrived in the capital. Moreover, it supposedly took a considerable amount of money to lift a curse.

If he lifted the curse and it turned out to be nothing much, his loss would be extreme. But Ark soon shook his head.

'No. It's still a sword that had cut up to 50 percent of the Health of a strong monster like Kundalini. It might actually be an incredible sword. But is there any other item?'

Ark packed the sword and Lancel's Remains and looked around.

However, he didn't see an item no matter how much he looked. Instead, he discovered a pathway leading upwards and climbed back to the place where the Boss Gnoll had been. He was able to start leaving the cave when he saw a dim light suddenly flowing from one side.

It was the altar that the Boss Gnoll had prayed at when calling forth Kundalini.

When Ark approached and touched it, a new window popped up.

You have discovered an ancient artifact, the Altar of Incubation.

Through Knowledge of Ancient Artifacts, you have discovered hidden information about the Altar of Incubation. Located in the dreary cave in which the giant monster Kundalini lurked, the Altar of Incubation is one of the ancient artifacts. Since ancient times, the Altar of Incubation has garnered curiosity from many scholars

The Altar of Incubation has the ability to quickly hatch eggs of all kinds. It's certain that the huge monster Kundalini used this Altar of Incubation to propagate the thousands of snakes that lived in the cave.

By gaining information about the ancient artifact Altar of Incubation, you have acquired bonuses.

Knowledge of Ancient Relics +10, Intelligence +5, Luck +3, and 30 Fame.

'So that's why there were so many snakes?'

It wasn't that big a secret, but it was good since his Mana rose because of the intelligence bonus.

Since Ark couldn't carry the altar away, Ark was about to just pass it by. But a thought that suddenly surfaced made him stop in his tracks.

'Wait? It'll accelerate the incubation of any egg?'

If so, it might be surprisingly useful.

Ark did have one egg. Just in case, Ark summoned the young Netherworld's Egg. Then he placed it on top of the altar, but there was no change.

Ark tilted his head, placed his pot on the altar, and made food just in case.

Then, as soon as he plunged the egg in, a message window popped up.

Survival Cooking has been completed. However, Netherworld's Egg has absorbed all of it. You have not determined what effect the food has.

A reaction from the Netherworld's Egg has been detected.

* Through the effect of the Altar of Incubation, Netherworld's Egg's growth rate has increased by 500%.

'Yeah, this is it!'

The growth rate quickened by 500 percent. That meant that he could give the effect of five feedings with a single one!

'If I can't make it hatch here, I can't guarantee when it'll wake up.'

Ark pulled out all his food ingredients and made food with Survival Cooking. His success rate was only once every ten times. After succeeding about five times in fifty tries, Survival Cooking finally rose to Intermediate.

Your level of Survival Cooking has risen through much experience.

Survival Cooking (Intermediate, Passive): You can mix spices to ingredients and raise the success rate.

Food with added spices will have stronger effects. The duration of effects of the food will also be doubled. However, please note that not only good effects will be stronger. It will require more courage to test out the effects of the food.

At the same time, numerous cracks spread out on the Netherworld's Egg and it finally split in half.

Netherworld's Egg has ingested sufficient nutrition and has hatched!

“F-finally!”

Ark focused his attention on the form that was rising with hazy light. Finally, he had three Familiars!

Even two Familiars provided considerable power. If he had three of them now, his hunting speed would increase even more.

Ark's eyes glimmered with expectation. But the light disappeared, and the form that appeared made Ark grimace with loathing.

“The hell is this? A s-snake?”

His new Familiar was a snake with a broad neck, like a cobra.

Amongst many, many animals, why the hell did it have to be a snake?

After entering the cave, he had been attacked by a thousand snakes. As if that wasn't enough, he had almost died fighting Kundalini, so he was sick and tired of snakes.

However, when he looked more carefully, he didn't really feel a sensation of disgust.

The Familiar's appearance was very different from all the snakes he'd seen until now.

Its silkworm-like, smooth body even looked pretty at first sight. In particular, its saucer-like round and large eyes were as blue as sapphires. The way its eyes shined as it stared at him did have a cute aspect.

"In any case, seems like it's somehow okay since it's a snake... Information window!"

After checking the information window, Ark once again tilted his head.

"W-what, what is this?"

Alamone Larvae

It is a mysterious snake living in the Netherworld, an Alamone's offspring.

An Alamone is a mysterious snake with the habit of placing all the items it sees into its stomach. Because they do not digest the swallowed items, those who desire the items have indiscriminately captured them, so now they have become extinct. Therefore, there are not many who know of them.

They are obedient and highly affectionate. Also, an Alamone recognizes the first existence it sees after hatching from its egg as its parent. The first existence the Alamone saw after hatching was you.

Now the Alamone will think of you as its parent, and it will become a loyal Familiar that will never betray its master no matter the situation. In addition, because it is tied to you by familial love, it will not consume Mana even if a battle breaks out.

Race: Creature of the Netherworld

Alignment: Dark

Class: —

Health: 50

Loyalty: —

Strength: —

Agility: —

Stamina: —

Wisdom: —

Intelligence: —

Luck: —

* It can store the same number of items as the summoner with no weight limit.

He had struggled like crazy and had finally hatched it, but it didn't have a single stat. That meant he couldn't use it in battle.

However, its special ability intrigued Ark.

'It can store items?'

Ark stared at the snake, which was charmingly clambering onto his arm.

Just in case, he tried holding out Lancel's Sword a bit. The snake stared at it blankly, then suddenly shot out its tongue like a frog catching a fly and swallowed it.

'Huh? Did it really eat it?'

Ark stared at the snake with a perplexed expression.

"Spit it back out!"

When Ark shouted in a bewildered voice, the snake opened its mouth again and spat out the sword onto Ark's hand. Then it blinked its bright eyes and rubbed its head into him as if it were asking for praise.

A laugh escaped Ark's lips.

"Ha, what the hell is this?"

Should he call it fascinating, or funny?

He felt an indescribable feeling. He no longer felt his initial disappointment, because he had desperately needed a spare bag. Moreover, there was no burden if it didn't eat Mana during battle like his other Familiars did.

It was something he learned too late, but a Dark Walker had a smaller bag capacity in comparison to other professions. Merchants and production classes were provided 6 basic bags. Magic professions had a basic bag and 3 spare bags with half the capacity. Even Warriors had one spare bag in addition to their basic bag.

But Ark's bag capacity had only expanded slightly with his job-change. After packing in all kinds of food ingredients, he'd found that he always lacked bag capacity.

Of course, there were ways to increase bag capacity. But the magic bag sold in large cities was a whopping 200 gold for only a quarter of the basic bag's capacity! Ark had given up early after hearing about the outrageous price.

'Since it can store the same capacity as a basic bag, it means I've earned 800

gold. Is this little guy the reason why a Dark Walker isn't provided an additional bag?"

"Alright, from now on I'll comfortably call you 'Snake.'"

Snake nodded as if it had heard. Then it excitedly rubbed itself on him repeatedly and wrapped itself around Ark's waist.

It looked like a belt made out of snake skin.

"You're a really likable fella. I'm satisfied with this much."

Now he had finished everything he had to do in the cave.

Ark headed back to the village of Lancel.

* * *

"You really did it!" The store owner exclaimed once Ark spread out the Gnoll leathers.

"This is the promised compensation. 20 silvers per leather. It's a total of 21 gold. And this is the reward for saving the village."

Galen gave him a total of 31 gold as a reward.

After completing the quest, his intimacy with Galen had risen considerably as a bonus. He was able to sell the japtém he had acquired within the cave for an additional 10 percent. Ark roughly finished tidying up and returned Lancel's Remains as he spoke of Kundalini.

Galen was surprised, but he soon nodded with understanding.

“So a demon like that lived in the cave. Lancel was a Mercenary stronger than anyone I know. I didn’t believe that such a person could have been killed by just Gnolls.”

“Yes, if it weren’t for the wound on Kundalini that Lancel inflicted, I would have never been able to win. But who exactly is Lancel? If he was able to enter the cave alone and face that demon, which indicates that his skill wasn’t common...”

Ark asked because he thought he might be able to learn more about Lancel’s Sword.

Galen hesitated with a dark expression and spoke, “You’re right, Lancel was no ordinary Mercenary. Once, he was so violent a Mercenary that they called him ‘Vampire’ in a border war. Over a hundred Soldiers died at his hands. But that was against Lancel’s will. It’s just that the battlefield and the sword made him go crazy. Eventually, Lancel regained his senses, realized the disillusionment of his actions, and left the battlefield. Then, with the determination to be a help to someone, he led the pioneers and decided to set up this village.

“So even as he fought a dreadful demon, he couldn’t give up on the village.”

“That’s right, he really was atoning, in a way.”

Galen let out a sigh.

“No matter his past, I admired him. I also love the village he set up. Now that

the danger has disappeared thanks to you, I'm of a mind to rebuild this village even if I have to devote my whole life to it. Speaking of which... are you thinking of continuing your journey?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then, will you listen to my request?"

"Please tell me."

"The pioneers who followed Lancel all love this village. The only reason why they left was because they worried about their family's safety. But now the danger is gone. If you happen to meet them in your journey, please let them know of this fact. If it's them, they will definitely return. Of course, it's good if you find and send new villagers, too. This village is open to anyone."

"I understand. I will speak of the person named Lancel to people I meet in my journey around the world. I will tell them how honorable and amiable a place this village is."

When Ark nodded, the quest was updated.

Quest has been updated.

Pioneer Village Lancel's Misfortune = Find New Settlers!

Lancel's general store owner, Galen, wants to continue Lancel's wish and rebuild the village.

What Lancel Village needs most right now are residents. Many people must gather and the laughter of children must fill the air for Lancel to be reborn as

a true village.

Galen has requested that you find residents for Lancel, like the pioneers who shared Lancel's goal in the past and even people who have nowhere else to go. Galen has accepted Lancel's wish to become helpful in the world and has promised to openly accept all residents. If you guide them to this place, Lancel Village will definitely become the village that Lancel desired.

Finding new settlers: achieved 0%

Difficulty: C

There wasn't any information about how to solve the quest. But after receiving the quest first, there would be a hint somewhere.

"You should hold onto Lancel's Sword. I know Lancel would also want that."

Of course, Ark had no intention of giving it up even if he was asked to.

Anyways, Ark left Lancel after those words.

The very first thing he did after leaving Lancel was to summon Skull.

Clack clack clack

When he saw Skull clacking its teeth as if there was nothing wrong, tears blurred Ark's eyes.

Although it was revived again, Skull had thrown away its life for his sake. In a sense, it was an action that was harder for an NPC that actually died than it was for a player. But Skull had sacrificed itself without hesitation. In

addition, Bat had done its best to help Ark.

When he looked at these Familiars, affection surged forth anew.

‘Such praiseworthy little rascals.’

Snake, the new addition to his family, was definitely lovable. Perhaps because Snake truly thought of him as its parent, but it put its all into rubbing Ark affectionately whenever it could.

‘That’s right, these guys are all I have. Sink or swim, I’ll go together with these fellas.’

It wasn’t just that his sense of unity was strengthened; there was also an actual benefit. He no longer had to give up items because of bag space. Now that he could store double the items thanks to Snake, Ark became even greedier.

‘Now that the family has increased, I have to earn more, even if it’s just 1 Copper.’

Ark scraped in all the japtem and ingredients he could get his hands on as he followed the Hand Mirror’s light. Because of that, his pace slowed even more, and he crossed the Argus Mountains after a week.

There were still unexplored regions on the other side of the Argus Mountains.

Even when he walked for several days, he couldn’t find any players, let alone NPCs.

After passing a plain where he could see the horizon and floods a few times and hunting the monsters he encountered in those places, he reached level 50. When his two bags were nearly chock full of japtrem, Ark was able to arrive at his destination.

‘It’s the lighthouse!’

On one side of the beach stood a picturesque, scenic lighthouse.

It was the lighthouse he’d seen through the Hand Mirror; he had finally reached his destination after a very long journey.

When he had seen it through images, it was a place that had only looked beautiful. But when he actually arrived and looked, the area around the lighthouse was crawling with monsters he had never seen before.

They were monsters with shark-like appearances equipped with both arms and legs. When he checked the information with Eyes of the Cat, he found they were called Sharkmen. They were level 55, but they were a little stronger than monsters of the same level.

‘Well, I’ll manage to fight them somehow, but it’s hard to face more than one of them. It’ll be good to wait until night for now.’

At night, all his stats increased by 20 percent.

To fight in the dark. It was one of the Dark Walker’s basic tactics.

Underwater City of Nodelesse

Ark's steps were full of vigor.

It was thanks to a phone call he had received this morning.

"Is this Mrs. Park Somi's guardian?"

As soon as he realized it was from the hospital, he was stricken with fear.

Until now, he had no memories of hearing good news from the hospital. Since her hospitalization, he had only gotten news of sudden seizures, and after his mother stabilized a little, they would call to press him about the late hospital bill. Either way, it wasn't a welcome phone call.

His voice became automatically nervous.

"Yes, why?"

"Lately, Mrs. Park Somi's condition has improved greatly. Therefore, the doctor has said he feels it would be good to slowly begin the rehabilitation therapy."

"Sh-she's gotten better?"

"Yes, a procedure of this kind requires parental consent. I'm calling to ask what the parents intend to do."

"If it's necessary, we must do it."

"Then, please visit the hospital today and sign a consent form. I will walk you through the rehabilitation program and additional costs in detail when you come to the hospital."

It was the best news he'd heard in recent years.

Five years had already passed since his mother had been hospitalized. After receiving surgery on her entire body, including her brain, she was in a comatose state for the first two years. When she woke up, she hadn't been able properly use her limbs.

What was worse, there had been times when she had occasionally gotten a sudden seizure and lost consciousness for a few days. Whenever it happens, Hyun Woo would hold his mother's hand and spend the night sleeplessly.

"The cause is mental stress from excessive shock."

The doctors explained his mother's symptoms as such.

Stress. For a doctor, it was truly a convenient term, since they just had to attach it to any kind of symptoms.

"As of now, there's nothing we can do. For the time being, we can only wait for her condition to improve."

The prescription of the doctors was to wait. While simply waiting her condition to improve, he had to pay 3 to 4 million Won (~\$3-4,000) in hospital bills monthly. Even so, he was able to endure it.

If his mother's condition suddenly worsened, the doctor babbled he might have to prepare himself for the worst. His anger would rise at the doctor who could only say those kinds of things, but there was nothing he could do.

In a hospital, a patient's family has no power.

Whenever it happened, the only thing Hyun Woo could do was to simply clasp his mother's hand and while crying, praying again and again to a God he didn't even believe in.

He didn't know if the prayers gotten through or not. In any case, after 4 years passed, hope began to bloom. Since last year, his mother's condition started to

improve.

Something like getting up from her bed was still a struggle, but she could eat on her own. In addition, she didn't have any big problems when she conversed. Since the doctor who had babbled Hyun Woo might have to give up was now supporting the rehab, it indicated a huge change in her condition.

Feeling like he could fly, Hyun Woo bought a fruit basket and went to her hospital room.

"Ah, Hyun Woo."

As soon as he entered the room, a middle aged man quickly got up.

"Hello, Detective Gwon."

"Yeah, it's been a while. Nothing out of the ordinary?"

"I'm fine as always."

"It's the day I come to the hospital, so I decided to drop by for a bit."

"There's no need to explain yourself."

Detective Gwon blushed and cleared his throat. "Ahem, then have your talk. I'll be outside.

The middle-aged man named Detective Gwon limped out of the room.

Hyun Woo laughed as he held his mother's hand.

"Mother, I heard. They say you've improved a lot lately."

"Yes, perhaps because my body is getting better, I've been feeling good too."

His mother laboriously tried to smile.

Looking at her haggard face pained his heart. His mother was already in her mid forties, but before the accident, everyone had told her she was beautiful.

However, five years of life in the hospital had snatched away her past appearance.

'No matter what, I have to return mother back to her old self.'

Even if Hyun Woo gave up on everything else, this was the one thing he wanted.

As a shadow crossed Hyun Woo's face, his mother said in a sad voice, "I'm sorry, this isn't the time for me to be like this....."

His mother always started with those words when she saw him.

Hyun Woo hadn't said a word, but his mother knew. No, there was no reason why she wouldn't know.

After her admittance to the hospital, relatives had only visited two or three times. Also, they only chattered about how difficult life was these days and other nonsense before leaving.

No matter how sick she was, there was no reason for her to think relatives would constantly be paying the hospital bills. Those relatives had a big impact on why Hyun Woo had closed himself off to people.

In the end, the entire burden was his.

She couldn't show him she knew this, since she was sorry for all the hardship she caused him.

"Please don't say such things. Just concentrate on getting better sooner, even if it's just by a day. Also, I am no longer a child. I'm 22 now. I can make a decent living for myself.

"You're right, you're not a kid anymore."

As she stroked Hyun Woo's hand, her voice became teary with emotion.

5 years... for an old person to whom today was the same as yesterday, it might be an inconsequential amount of time. But Hyun Woo, who had been a high school sophomore, had became an adult at the age of twenty-two. It was the time when youths experiences the most changes.

How would she feel, having to watch her son change as the weight on his shoulders crushed him from her sickbed.

Hyun Woo shook his head as he changed the topic.

"I see Detective Gwon comes by often."

"That's right, I'm thankful to him. It's been five years already..."

"Yes, it would have been really hard for me as well if not for Detective Gwon."

Hyun Woo sincerely thought of Detective Gwon, Gwon Hwa Rang, as his benefactor.

The accident his father had caused five years ago had shaken Hyun Woo's life to its roots.

His father passed away and the victim died. A chain collision occurred, causing over 10 people to be seriously injured. It was only for a few seconds, but the accident had even been on the news. The anchorman mentioned a Mr. Kim while babbling his kind of irresponsible driving was hard to accomplish.

The impact from just a few seconds of news was amazing.

Criticism had poured in from all directions. Even family turned their backs.

The life Hyun Woo had believed in and thought would last forever crumbled so very easily. For the high school sophomore Hyun Woo, it was too heavy of a reality to accept.

From then on, Hyun Woo began to stray. He drank and he smoked. He even fought on the streets. He hated his father who caused the accident, and he hated the world who pointed fingers.

At that time, the one who found Hyun Woo, grabbed him by the collar, and set him right was the detective in charge of investigating the accident, Gwon Hwa Rang. For the first time in his life, Hyun Woo was beaten to a pulp.

Then he was dragged by Gwon Hwa Rang to the hospital.

The truth was he was running away from there.

The truth Hyun Woo had to acknowledge wasn't in the night streets flashing with neon lights. In the intensive care ward, barely maintaining life through multiple IVs and a respirator, was his mother.

That day, Hyun Woo cried without restraint for the first time.

Gwon Hwa Rang always took care of Hyun Woo after the incident. When there was a problem at school, he put everything aside to come, and he used his connections to introduce Hyun Woo to a part time job with a decent pay. When Hyun Woo urgently needed a loan, he volunteered to stand as a guarantor. It was thanks to him Hyun Woo was able to safely graduate from high school.

For Hyun Woo, Gwon Hwa Rang was a savior— no, he was more than that.

"It's just that I always felt sorry toward Detective Gwon."

"Me too. But you don't have to think that way, Mother."

"What do you mean?"

"The reason Detective Gwon comes to the hospital probably isn't because he feels responsible. He may be like a bear on the outside, but he harbors a sly intention inside. You know this too, right?"

As Hyun Woo smiled wickedly, his mother blushed to the tips of her ears.

"This guy, teasing his mother?"

"Hahaha, your face got red. Looks like you don't dislike it?"

"You rascal, don't even think about saying anything in front of Detective Gwon."

"Mother."

Suddenly Hyun Woo spoke heavily with a sombre tone.

His mother made a slightly tense expression.

"I'm not against it."

"Really, this guy!"

"Hahaha, I'll be back in a bit after meeting Detective Gwon."

Hyun Woo pulled his hand free from the mother he'd been teasing and left the sickroom.

Detective Gwon, who'd been sitting next to the hospital ward, laughed as he asked, "What do you think? She's gotten much better, right?"

"Yes, her mood has brightened a lot too. Thank you."

"I didn't do anything..." Detective Gwon mumbled with a sheepish expression.

He glanced furtively at Hyun Woo while looking like he was thinking about something, then pulled out a cigarette and hastily put it away again after being pierced by a nurse's glare. Then he scratched his head with a frustrated face and spoke up with difficulty.

"By the way, Hyun Woo"

"Yes?"

"I heard from the doctor rehabilitation treatment will soon start, but... well... I'm talking about the rehab treatment. From what I've heard, they say it takes a ton of money. You're not being covered by insurance. So, well, I actually have more money than it looks."

Detective Gwon laughed awkwardly as he babbled. "Hahaha, that's right, I have quite a lot of money. That's it. I've got quite a bit left from the retirement pay I got from quitting detective work, and I get pension, and the pay from my current job is good too...No, I'm not saying I'm well off, but I have money and nothing else to spend it on. So what I mean is..."

"It's alright." Hyun Woo shook his head.

"I understand what you want to say. I'm really grateful, but it's alright. I can handle my mother's hospital bills somehow on my own."

"No, you see, don't misunderstand. I just have nothing to spend money on.

"Detective-nim. You like my mother, right?"

Pierced by Hyun Woo's bullseye, Gwon Hwa Rang was startled.

"Th, That is...."

"There's no need to hide it. I am not a child."

"I'm sorry."

"What's there to apologize for? If it's you, Detective Gwon, I'll welcome you anytime."

"Then, what's the problem?"

"Me liking you and this issue are different. Do you remember when you beat me to a pulp and dragged me to the hospital?"

"Yeah, something like that did happen."

"After seeing my mother lying in the intensive care ward, I realized how thoughtlessly I had been living. Then I made a vow. No matter what happens, I will make her better with my strength. It's not because I feel uncomfortable about using your money, or because it hurts my pride. I just want to keep my vow. Because it's about my mother, and not just anyone."

Gwon Hwa Rang gazed at him wordlessly and patted Hyun Woo's shoulder.

"Commendable lad."

"I don't deserve those words. Not yet."

"What you've said made you commendable."

Gwon Hwa Rang nodded as he rose from his seat.

"I understand. If you're a man, you've gotta be stubborn. Do as you want, but promise me one thing. If something gets too difficult to handle alone comes up, you must come to me first. You can promise me, right?"

"Yes, Detective Gwon."

"Just call me mister, it's been a while since I quit being a detective. I will go now."

Gwon Hwa Rang turned and walked down the hallway.

Whenever he saw the detective's limping figure walking away, Hyun Woo felt bitter.

'Why does each and every person around me undergo something difficult?'

2 years ago, Gwon Hwa Rang arrested a robber, who boasted a flashy career after a bloody fight. But, while capturing him, he was stabbed in the ankle and calf multiple times and became crippled.

It wouldn't have been enough even if he had gotten a medal, but he had to suffer ridicule instead.

The problem was the single bullet he'd fired during the arrest. The robber he shot was wounded but made a full recovery, and Gwon Hwa Rang became crippled. Despite it all, it was excessive force and irresponsible use of governmental power for many human rights groups, and there had been an uproar.

To them, the robber was a person, but it seemed they didn't even see the detective as a person. Since the human rights groups made a fuss, the media had also rolled up their sleeves and pitched in. Once the two groups joined hands, burying one person wasn't a problem. In the end, Gwon Hwa Rang was stigmatized as the violent cop and was forced to retire in disgrace. Thankfully, his career was recognized and he was now guiding ex-criminals as a probation officer, but it wasn't a sufficient compensation.

From then on, the Detective Gwon Hwa Rang who used to shout, 'REALIZE A COMMUNITY' without a shred of shame like an ignorant child always had sagging shoulders.

'If at least his leg heals...'

When he reached the thought, New World suddenly came to mind.

There were no disabled people in virtual reality games. Since you moved the character by scanning the brain, physical disabilities were no problem.

So in the game, even Gwon Hwa Rang could be a normal person.

"Detective Gwon, have you ever played games before?"
"Game?"

Gwon Hwa Rang tilted his head wondering what was being said out of the blue.

"Well, I played a little in the past, but..."
"Then be sure to try out a game called New World."

"You play games these days?"

"Yes, you will also like it if you try it."

"New World, I did hear about it..." Detective nodded without much thought.

"Okay. When I have time, I'll try it."

"You must."

* * *

The picturesque seashore was awash in darkness.

Because of the darkness, the moon and stars rose shone even more brightly.

It was the time of he who walks in the darkness, the Dark Walker.

The Sharkmen protecting the lighthouse were, as their appearance suggested, nocturnal monsters.

As night fell, their stats rose by 30%. On the other hand Ark only received a stat bonus of 20% in darkness, even so, Ark still waited until it was night to start fighting.

The stat bonus in the darkness— it wasn't something that only applied to Ark. The abilities of the Familiars, using Ark as their host, also increased.

Granted, it was difficult to hope for much attack power or defense, but even so, the increase in Agility and Intelligence demonstrated a significant effect in their team work. Maneuverability, understanding of the battle situation, and the ability to deal with an emergency were all influenced. It was a part of what he'd realized while learning how to use his Familiars properly. In the end, Ark's abilities alone were increased by 20%, but the whole team's

efficiency increased by at least 40%. With the special ability 'Stealth' added on top of that, their usable plans became infinite.

In a way, it could be said Ark had become a true Dark Walker at last.

'The night is long. There's no need to rush.'

His destination was right in front of him, but Ark was in no hurry.

A Sharkman is aggressive. Fighting on the totally open seashore would definitely lead to all the nearby Sharkmen swarming in.

"Bat, go and lure one."

"Understood, Master."

Soon, Bat crossed through the darkness and annoyingly pestered a Sharkman. The Sharkman's anger gauge gradually filled, and it cried a strange noise as it chased Bat. All the Sharkmen would have swarmed if Ark had come himself, but since it was just a bat, they didn't feel the need to do so.

Bat lured the Sharkman all the way to the gloomy forest where Ark was using 'Stealth.' There's no need to speak of what happened afterward.

The first strike was a backstab. Activating Eyes of the Cat, he continuously burst out with Dark Blade.

Ark had invested a little more in Intelligence after fighting Kundalini to bring his Mana up to 600. Even after using Eyes of the Cat and Dark Blade in succession four times, he could still maintain the Familiars for over one

minute.

The Sharkman who was lured into the shade was turned into soup one minute later.

Shark Fin Soup, a food made by Survivor Cooking

A soup made with the rich nutritious shark fin, it boasts a great taste. With the addition of refreshing spices, you have brought out the hidden potential of the ingredients.

Satiety +50%. 400 Health recovery over a 1 minute duration, special effect (Shark Skin): Defense increased by 20 for 30 minutes.

Once Survival Cooking reached Intermediate, the failure rate decreased. And after adding a few types of spices he'd bought in Lancel, making the same food granted new special effects.

For example, if he added a spice to the Howling Seasoned Chilies, which raised Strength in exchange for inducing a confusion hex, Agility also rose and the confusion duration was shortened.

Of course, good effects weren't the only ones added. It was Survival Cooking, which didn't allow letting your guard down even while making food!

If he added a spice to the Refreshing Herb Tea which simply restored only Mana, it caused a poisonous hex. So if he didn't drink Herb Tea every 10 minutes for an hour, his Mana would become 0.

At times, food made without using spices was better.

It really wasn't a funny effect, but it was fun in its own way.

Ark brought up the cooking information window and smiled in delight.

'Anyway, I have already gathered 80 recipes.'

2 out of 3 of them were close to poison, but it was pleasing to have something grow.

In any case, after being forced to test the Shark Fin cooking, Bat's stats rose another step. Then, they tirelessly hunted Sharkmen to procure more ingredients.

The Sharkmen didn't seem to care about the disappearing allies next to them. They were too busy running around catching the animals wandering around them.

Thanks to their attitude, they were all finished off after two hours with only one Sharkman loitering in front of the lighthouse left. Perhaps because it was a chief, it was bigger than other Sharkmen and black in color.

"Eyes of the Cat."

After checking the information, it was level 58. Ark's level was 50, so considering the bonus from the darkness, it was a monster with a level difference of at least 10. But Ark also received bonuses from his title and quests, so various stats were high for his level. Taking this into account, the difference between them was only about 6 levels.

A smile blossomed on Ark's lips.

'It's a good level to evaluate my progress so far.'

"Bat, Skull. Wait here."

Ark put the Familiars on standby and walked towards the lighthouse alone.

As a human approached, the Sharkman puffed up its chest as it ran forward.

Ark twisted his body for a roundhouse kick into the Sharkman's jaw, who was then thrown back. The maw shut with a thwack. That was the starting gun signalling the start of the fight.

In New World, level is a universal value. In other words, it wasn't an absolute value.

In battle, there is no such thing as an absolute.

The surrounding conditions, judgements made on the fly, reflexes, and numerous other variables were also applied.

Combat is where a significantly stronger person sometimes loses against someone who doesn't seem like they'll stand a chance. New World also followed the same rule.

Of course, level and stats are still the most important. But, a significantly higher level only meant the probability of winning is infinitely close to 99%; it's still not 100%.

Ark had learned it from the boss monsters he'd fought until now. So he poured all the techniques his body had become familiar through this recent adventure onto the Sharkman.

He hadn't even raised his stats with food.

He didn't use Eyes of the Cat, let alone Dark Blade. He only used the senses he had gained through actual combat to battle the Sharkman.

A chain of kicks followed by sword attacks!

He didn't even need to borrow the power of skills to be able to discern weak points. As Taekwondo and sword attacks intersected, he dealt critical hits like crazy.

When Ark's Health had gone down to 30%, the Sharkman finally fell to its knees and died.

"Awesome, Master! This time you were really awesome!"

Clack! Clack! Clack!

Bat and Skull gave him a round of applause as they made a big fuss.

Ark just grinned.

Once his excitement settled, his heart leapt. Even without their chatter, he'd been able to feel he had definitely become stronger.

As the Sharkman disappeared, a Shark Fin and a few other items were dropped.

Sharkman's Shackle (Magic)			
Defense Type	Rock Boots		
Defense	10	Durability	20/20
Weight	100	Usage Restriction	At least 120 Strength
The shackle the Sharkman leader wore; because it is made of considerably heavy rock, it will slow the movement if worn. The defense is also low, so it's difficult to hope it will be useful in combat. However, because of its weight, you can keep your balance even if a storm rages upon you.			
Effect: Agility -15, imparts a heavy weight to the wearer's body.			

Mermaid's Scale (Special): (Quantity 5)

The scale of Mermaids, inhabitants of the ocean; if you hold it with your mouth, you can breathe underwater.

It wasn't a very useful item.

'Since it wasn't even a boss monster, this much should be about right.'

After having defeated the Sharkman leader, Ark's gaze turned towards the lighthouse.

It was the final destination of a long journey.

The lighthouse was considerably older than when he had seen it in the image. He thought it looked beautiful from far away, but with a closer look, the bricks and paint peeling off here and there, reminded him of a haunted house. He felt this way more strongly because it was night.

But, once he rose to the top of the lighthouse, his feelings changed once again.

He looked down from the window on the entirety of the night ocean surrounding him on all sides.

In the dark, the seashore was clearly visible, its crashing waves sparkled with starlight. It had a mysterious atmosphere, just as the music from the mirror had conveyed.

'Then, what should I do now?'

Since the Hand Mirror had guided him here, there had to be a clue to the quest. Ark soon found a small groove in the center of the lighthouse.

When he found the groove, he had a rough idea of what he had to do.

Ark took out the hand mirror and inserted the handle into the groove.

Kukuku!

At that time, the lighthouse suddenly heaved a breath and rotated. He saw the scenery pass by through the simultaneously rotating hand mirror. And when the hand mirror pointed toward a single star, the turning suddenly stopped.

Flash!

The mirror amplified the starlight a hundred fold and shot it out across the night sea, making a road along the dark waters.

With a drumming noise, the quest was updated.

The quest has been updated.

[The Mysterious Mirror's Whisper → Entrance to a New World](#)

At the end of a long, long journey, you have finally found the lighthouse.

However, take notice: The lighthouse is not the final destination, but merely a milestone. This is the end of the world. This is the entrance to another world, only for those who have been chosen. Receive the mirror's guidance and find the new world; a new adventure is awaiting you.

Difficulty: E

Quest Limitation: Knowledge of Ancient Artifacts

* * *

'The mirror's guidance? Do I have to follow the light this time?'

Ark looked at the path of light shining down on the water.

It looked as if the light was connected to the depths of the ocean.

In the end he had to pass through the ocean, but how? There was no need to worry about it. Because there is a rule the answer is always set up beside the problem.

'Is this the reason why the Sharkmen's leader dropped Mermaid's Scales?'

Ark put the hand mirror away and started on his new adventure.

As expected, he was able to breathe after holding a Mermaid's Scale in his mouth and submerging his head. With each of his Familiars biting down on a Mermaid Scale, Ark entered the water.

Even within the water they were able to move while breathing freely.

Something he had occasionally experienced in his dreams had been made possible.

It was just a game, but the unfamiliar sensation was amazing.

It was beautiful under the sea.

There was a boundless forest made of seaweed and corals shrouded with transparent shades of blue. Colorful fishes were drifting around it. It was a magical sight he'd only seen in documentaries, unfolded before his very eyes.

However the depths of the ocean wasn't a place where only the beautiful could be seen. As the shoals of fish suddenly dispersed, some massive object attacked Ark.

'Octopus!'

A demon of the sea, it was an octopus monster with the name Devil Fish.

While brandishing its eight legs, the Devil Fish attacked.

Ark quickly avoided its body, but there was something he didn't realize.

The physics in the real world also applied in the New World! Since he was under water, he couldn't move well, let alone keep his balance properly.

As Ark flailed, a bright red light flashed before his eyes.

- You have received a critical hit from the Devil Fish.
180 points of damage.

Since the critical did only 180 damage, it didn't seem to be as strong as it looked.

However the current problem was Ark didn't have a method of fighting

properly. As he was hit by the octopus' legs, his body spun round and round. Even Skeleton and Bat could only flounder.

'Dammit, If only I could get my balance.... Ah, that's right!'

"Snake, Sharkman's Shackle!"

At Ark's voice, Snake quickly spat out the shackle.

It was truly fortunate he had entrusted it to Snake because it was too heavy.

When combat starts, weapons, shields, potions, and other items can't be taken out of the bag. But the restriction didn't apply to Snake.

Granted, it couldn't be helped to be unprotected while changing equipment. He was dealt two more blows as he put on the shackles. Then, as he felt the enormous weight, his body plunged down. Thanks to that, he was able to regain his balance.

The items the Sharkman had dropped were absolutely necessary for his journey under the sea. But it alone didn't solve everything.

'My body is heavy!'

It wasn't just the shackle's weight; Ark was underwater. Breathing was made possible by the Mermaid's Scale, but his movements being slowed by water resistance was unavoidable. His sword, which had always flown like the wind, moved like a slow-motion video.

That wasn't all.

- Your attack has failed because of the Devil Fish's elasticity.

Bounce!

Ark's sword bounced off the rubber-like elasticity of the Devil Fish.

"WHAT THE HELL? Eyes of the Cat!"

When Ark chanted the skill, red marks were drawn on the Devil Fish's body.

It was normal for dozens of places to show up for other monsters, but the Devil Fish only had 3 or 4. And those places only showed up momentarily when the Devil Fish attacks.

'So I have to wait for the moment when its muscles tense up for an attack and then counterattack?'

The Devil Fish was level 40. It was lower than Ark, but the special physical limitations of the underwater environment made the difficulty feel several hundred times greater. It was nearly impossible to accurately pierce the ever-changing weak points with his immensely lowered agility in the water.

'I'd be able to dish out damage with defense-ignoring Dark Blade, but...'

He didn't have much Mana left because he had floundered in the beginning and wasted time.

'There is only one way.'

He'd be late if he checked the red points by eye before attacking. He had to predict the Devil Fish's movement beforehand and stab before the red point appeared. Ark concentrated on defense while inspecting the Devil Fish's movements with Eyes of the Cat. Which parts emerged as weak points at which movements, he stored them one by one within his head.

'Alright, I've roughly figured out the bastard's movements. It's here now!'

Ark dodged the incoming octopus's feet and stab it with the blade.

- You have landed a critical hit!

Though it was difficult, he dealt a 100% critical hit when the attack succeeded.

'Good, I can win as long as I know the method!'

Ark dodged the octopus legs as he successfully counter attacked about 10 times. When the Devil Fish fell into critical condition, his sight suddenly darkened as he took damage.

It was because the Devil Fish blocked his vision with ink and attacked.

At the attack he hadn't imagined, Ark was getting completely creamed. Within the darkness, he couldn't see an inch through, it was hard to land attacks, let alone avoid the octopus legs.

Just then, he heard Bat's voice from one side.

"Master, this way, stab now!"

Ark swung the sword in reflex and another critical landed and his sight cleared.

The Devil Fish slowly faded.

'This isn't a simple matter.'

Ark's face became serious.

The octopus' level was 40. Outside, he could beat monsters of the same level even while picking his nose. But the octopus had driven Ark to the brink of death.

The underwater special environment was no different from applying great penalty on Ark's abilities.

If Ark hadn't grinded and polished his practical sense he probably wouldn't have won even if he were 10 levels higher than he currently was.

'I don't know what other kinds of monsters will appear from here on. What's certain is that since I'm underwater, they'll be completely different in type from those outside. In my current state, can I win against monsters that are stronger than the Devil Fish?'

There was no guarantee that wasn't the only problem.

His leather armor and rock helmet were fine, but his steel sword received a

water penalty and its durability kept dropping just by equipping it.

Coral Dagger			
Weapon Type	Dagger		
Attack Damage	1~4	Durability	15
Weight	15	Usage Restriction	None
A dagger made by sharpening the coral. The blade has satisfactory luster and shape. Excellent for use as a decoration. Because the material is coral, it is impossible to repair with the usual method.			

In the end, Ark was forced to equip the lousy dagger he obtained by hunting the Sharkmen.

'It's fun.'

The entire situation was the worst, but Ark's motivation increased instead.

'Marine monsters can't be beaten just because you have higher stats. Real skills are needed! This is the chance to raise my level, not my character's.'

Ark's maximum interest was boosted.

It was obvious, a higher level allowed you to defeat stronger enemies and created a chance to earn better items and money. But the level up Ark was thinking of wasn't simply increasing stats or skill proficiency.

Didn't you see how a character clinging to only levels and numbers like Andel met its end?

The player's ability to control the character was more important than the character's skill. It was also the reason Ark had been able to fight the Sharkman 1 on 1.

A character's stats were meaningless no matter how high they were if they weren't used properly. The ability to utilize 100% of level and stats! It was something only possible with the effort of the user.

'In any case, it's difficult to level up by hunting level 40 monsters. But there's no where better to truly level up, not in numbers but in my ability. This is where I can level up the second time.'

There was no need to get too impatient because of Alan or the other applicants. After all, haste makes waste.

In the past, he would've just focused on raising his character level. But Ark had completely grasped New World's characteristics now.

'I'll conquer the octopus for now!'

Ark decisively made up his mind and started to train.

The first hurdle was getting used to the water.

Ark started catching the fishes wandering nearby. Fish didn't deal damage to Ark, and because they were small and moved rapidly, they were appropriate training opponents.

Ark, Bat, and Skull floundered as they chased the fishes.

The training wasn't fulfilled only within the game. Outside the game, Ark went to the swimming pool in his spare time. He walked and let fly punches and kicks in the water for several hours. Other people whispered as they looked at him strangely, but he didn't pay them any attention. Self was always more important than others.

The effects slowly began to show after training for about 3 days.

"Uhahah, these guys!"

Bat became able to outstretch its wings like a stingray and swim underwater while chasing the fish. It was a change that couldn't be compared to three days ago, when it had just flailed around.

The wingless Skull also found a measure of its own. It aptly utilized the movement of the current as it reached a level where it could roll its body.

But as useless as it was, the most outstandingly skilled one was Snake, who was always wrapped around his waist. When Ark praised Bat and Skull's growth, Snake snorted and traversed the ocean like an eel. Then it returned and coiled itself as if asking to be complimented too.

He did praise it, but the ability was meaningless since it couldn't be used in combat. Anyway, of course the one who felt the greatest result was Ark.

- You have landed a critical hit!

He countered all of the wildly incoming octopus legs.

There was nothing to hinder Ark's movement. His underwater movements were still slower than on land, there were movements that can only be done in water. How to move while reducing the water resistance; no, rather, it was how to utilize the water resistance.

Ark realized the solution with his body, not his mind.

Water is not stationary. It is always flowing somewhere.

He read the water flow and didn't resist. Rather, he moved his body with the flow.

The effect was as expected!

'The Devil Fish is no longer a challenge.'

Ark went to a deeper part of the water.

As expected, the emerging monsters abnormal in their appearances and abilities. The crab-like Monster Crab had its entire body encased in a steel-like shell, hitting it with his sword lowered its durability. He could only land blows by precisely hitting the joints, where the shell was weak.

There was also a jellyfish like monster, Jellyfish. It swung countless tentacles paralyzing anything it touches.

They were monsters that were each incomparably difficult!

But with steady training, Ark defeated them one by one.

At first, he had to swing his sword three or four times to finally land a blow, but with every repetition the number decreased. After a week had passed, he was able to land a blow every time he swung his sword.

The Devil Fish's ink was no longer a problem either. At first he'd been barely able to locate it through Bat's voice, but once he got used to underwater combat, he was able to make all predictions just through the movement of the current.

The most difficult enemy was the Jellyfish. He could end it with two or three stabs to the body, but its tentacles got in his way. If it touches him, he will be paralyzed and could only stay still while getting hit until he had lose at least 20% of his Health.

But since he'd gotten used to the Devil Fish's octopus leg attack, he became able to dodge the tentacles without much difficulty.

'Good, I'm starting to get the feel of it.'

Ark no longer used food effects. Food made with Jellyfish had the effect of reducing water penalty by 50%, but he didn't even eat it.

He won with just his sword and skills.

As long as he was rigged up with the ability to fight properly, marine monsters were no match for Ark. Whenever he swung his sword, three or four blows were executed in succession.

Since Ark's actual level was higher, once he found the strategy, fighting three or four enemies at once wasn't a problem. Ten days had passed, and although he hunted countless marine monsters, his level only rose by 2. But since he'd fought under the water penalty, his Sword-Hand Mastery rose by 100 and had surpassed 230.

In addition, his Nursing skill had also risen by 60. He had abused the skill while driving his Familiars to near death.

But the biggest result of it all was Ark and his Familiars' combat sense had swiftly increased.

'Now I can fight any monster that appear, as if they were on land.'

* * *

But no matter how pleased he was about the situation he couldn't stay here forever.

Ark began to seriously follow the road of light.

The ocean road was more complicated than he thought.

There were places that looked blocked but were actually open when he went there, and vice versa. Also, places rife with strong currents were hard to even

approach. Since the hand mirror's light always showing the path in a straight line, it wasn't easy to find the road.

Only after two days had passed, Ark reached the destination. After clearing and emerging from a dense seaweed forest, a broad underwater plain unfurled. At the center, the sight of a city bathed in light appeared.

"Is this the destination!"

An exclamation automatically burst out of him.

Brilliantly colorful light poured out from between the buildings soaring up like enormous coral reefs between the castle walls. As shocking as it was, the ones who were coming and going busily between the walls were Mermaids.

Mermaids had the lower body of a fish, and both sides of their faces had fins. The scene of them mingling with colorful fish reminded him of a scene from a fairy tale.

"Fish. Fish!" Bat said noisily while smacking his mouth.

At the end of the fishing training, he knew the taste of fish.

"By any chance, don't say that to those people."

"Damn, but they're probably tasty!"

"... Just keep your mouth shut."

After glaring at Bat, Ark approached the city entrance.

"Ex-excuse me."

Ark talked to the entrance guard.

The guard, who was wearing armor made by connecting seashells, and holding a spear that appeared to be manufactured from some kind of horn, made a surprised expression.

"Huh, you're a Human, right?"

"Yes, I'm Human."

"First time seeing a human. I thought after the catastrophe the road to the outside was completely severed... Anyway you really don't have a tail. With those uncomfortable legs I can't understand how you arrived here. Ah, also how are you breathing? I heard humans can't breath under water?"

"A Mermaid's Scale fell into my hands by chance."

Ark added he'd obtained the Mermaid's Scale from a Sharkman.

The Mermaid guard nodded with eyes filled with goodwill.

"Those stupid and vicious Sharkmen are the enemies of Merpeople. You, who defeated those Sharkmen and avenged Merpeople, are definitely a great adventurer. We aren't opposed to Humans either. Since you're a rare guest, I'll welcome you happily."

"Thank you. But what is the name of this city?"

"You came here without even knowing it?"

The Mermaid guard replied with a prideful voice, "This is the City of Merpeople, the people of the sea, Nodelesse. It has received the sea God's blessing and is the sole place permitted to be called the most perfectly beautiful. If you stay here and see, you too will come to understand."

"I am already aware. I have been to many places, but this is the first time I have seen such a beautiful city. Simply seeing the city conveys the sublimity of Merpeople"

"Ohh, you are wise."

The Mermaid guard smiled brightly and nodded.

Ark had maximized his intimacy with countless NPCs. Sweet-talking one fish was nothing. Ark raised his intimacy with lip service and pulled out the main point.

"Do you perhaps know a name called Christin?"

The name of a person who briefly appeared in the hand mirror's images, Christin.

Currently it was the only clue to solve the quest.

However, the response was strange.

The friendly eyes of the guard suddenly filled with wariness.

"Where did you hear that name?"

"Actually I came here to find the person named Christin."

"There is no one named Christin here."

"Yes, I know. I think it is someone who had lived a long time ago..."

"I said I don't know!"

The Mermaid guard suddenly got mad and turned his head.

Ark could feel the intimacy he had raised plunging down.

"If you hadn't defeated the Sharkman and come to this place, I would've chased you out immediately."

The Mermaid guard definitely knew about Christin. Ark wanted to get more information in any way possible, but if the intimacy fell even more then it seemed he'd be blocked entry to the city.

"I apologize. I must have mistaken.

Ark roughly equivocated and entered the city.

Once they were in the city, Bat let out its rage.

"What is with that guy? He is just a fish!"

"Please just be quiet. You're driving me mad."

Ark shook his head back and forth with an obstinate expression.

It wasn't just the Mermaid guard. He spoke to several Mermaids after entering the city, but the reactions were all the same.

Just by hearing the name Christin they got into a temper and didn't want to talk anymore.

He had thought once he arrived here, the quest would naturally solve itself. And the very same thought hadn't changed yet.

The Mermaids showed such sensitive reactions meant there was some kind of story behind it. However, since they got mad just by mentioning the name, there was no way he could find out.

Win the hearts of the People

'Whew, it's really hopeless.' Ark heaved a sigh.

He stopped Merpeople at random and asked, but it was of no use. Finding information about Christin was going to be harder than expected. Judging from past experience, there was only one way to solve situations like this. He must raise his intimacy with the Merpeople.

The problem was the information required significantly high intimacy.

Based on the Mermaid Guards' reaction, the favor he'd earned from just a few words was no use. In addition, he didn't know how to increase intimacy in this strange Underwater City.

'The first thing to do is to gain information about Merpeople other than Christin.'

Ark decided to relax and took a stroll around the city.

Nodelesse was slightly different compared to a Human Village. Human Villages, no matter how small always had a tavern, inn, and various shops. However Nodelesse even though it was 3, 4 times larger than a Human Village, only had one restaurant and a General Store.

'Should I clean out my japtém for now?'

After wandering in the ocean for nearly half a month, his bag and Snake's stomach were full of items.

"Oh, you're a Human. It's surprising for a Human to come to my store. Right, what are you looking for?"

As soon as he entered the store, an elderly Merman greeted him. With his wrinkled face and shaggy beard, the Merman didn't look quite right, but Ark

still sported a friendly smile.

"I have some things to sell and things to buy. May I look around the shop?"
"Go ahead."

Ark went through the goods in the store.

All of the items available in the store were things he had never seen before. It was inevitable since he was in an Underwater City, and because all the materials could only be acquired in the ocean. Shields made out of seashells, bows made out of Whale bones, Spears carved from tuna bones, etc.

The materials had a slightly crude feeling to them. Perhaps because it was a difficult city to come to, the stats transcended his imagination.

Clam Shield			
Gear Type	Shell Shield		
Defense	190	Durability	60
Weight	30	Usage Restriction	Level 50, Warrior Related
This shield was made by polishing a large Clam shell sturdy as steel, so it cannot be broken by any sword. It was made with a streamline surface, so it is easy to carry it and swim.			

Price	1,3777P
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Electric Eel Breastplate (Magic)			
Gear Type	Leather Armor		
Defense	70	Durability	55
Weight	50	Usage Restriction	Level 55
<p>Armor made from the hides of Electric Eels living in the ocean depths. Attacks will slide off its slippery surface. The characteristic of Electric Eel remains; it will emit an electric shock with a fixed chance when hit.</p>			
<p>Attack Nullification: 30% 10% Chance of counter-attacking with an electric shock when hit.</p>			
Price	2,500P		

Even a normal defensive gear, Clam Shield, had an enormous defense of 190.

Well, Shields were originally set with high defense since the defense was added when the player actually blocked with it. Even so, 190 was definitely an incredible defense.

The added special effects of the Electric Eel Breastplate were also no joke.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it rare. It is attractive enough to want to buy 1 or 2 if the price is right. But strangely enough, the price was in units of "P."

"What does P mean?"

"Hm?"

The store owner twisted his head around wondering what Ark was talking about. After staring blankly at Ark for awhile, the store owner nodded in understanding.

"Ahh, you are a Human. P means this." The store owner raised a Pearl as big as an eyeball. "Here at Nodelesse, Pearl is used as currency."

"Then for 2,500P, you need 2,500 Pearls to buy the item?"

"Of course."

Ark's jaw dropped unconsciously.

He had gathered 3 or 4 pearls when he crossed through the ocean. At that

time, Ark was very happy. Since they were rare jewels, he thought they could be sold for a really high price. So far, the jewels he'd occasionally earned were 10 Silver for the low-quality ones, and the high-quality rare ones were worth 5 gold.

But he need 2,500 of those Pearls to buy one armor? Doesn't it mean even if he bought it for a cheap price, it would still amount to 250 gold? No matter how good the performance of the item was, it was an unbelievable rip-off.

But Ark soon changed his way of thinking.

'No, it might be because the the value of the Pearls are unbelievably low in this place.'

If so, there was nothing more to desire. If he acquired Pearls in bulk in this place and took advantage of the value difference, he could amass a sizable fortune.

Ark thought of this and opened his bag.

"If I sold all of this, how much can I get?"

The bag was filled with Clam shells, seaweed, and things like the flesh of marine monsters.

But the store owner muttered in an uninterested voice, "Why would I buy them?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Those things are everywhere outside, so there's no need for me to buy

them."

The store owner was turning his head uninterested, but then he flinched. He pointed at one item with fascinated eyes.

"Wh-what is that?"

"What? This shoe?"

"Shoe? Ooh, you call it a shoe? It looks marvelous. Do humans wear those on their feet? But I think this is the first time I've seen such material. What is it made out of?"

"What do you mean. It is just animal hide..."

While answering with a flummoxed expression, Ark suddenly had an epiphany.

'Right, this is an Underwater City!'

An Underwater City, the City of Merpeople who spent hundreds of years without any contact with the outside world.

Just like how the Underwater City items were fascinating to Ark, the items found on land were fascinating to the Merpeople; even if it was just a ragged leather shoe. Since they lived underwater, they never had a chance to glimpse at land animal leather before.

In other word, scarcity! No matter where you are, rarity is what decides the value of goods.

Indeed, the store owner's eyes were filled with desire.

"Interesting! Very interesting! Are you saying this is an animal hide? Why did you only show me trash when you have such amazing goods? I don't need the other things, but if you'll sell that or similar goods, I'll buy them all. I'll give you a good price too."

The store owner shook the bag filled with Pearls to say he wanted to trade immediately.

The items Ark currently possessed were no more than japtem. Plus, they were goods with only 1 durability, since he used them to raise his Magic Restoration skill. At a normal village, it was difficult to receive even a few coppers. But the shop owner was saying he would buy them for a good price.

This was definitely a bonanza.

But Ark's hand that was taking out items suddenly stopped.

'Wait, if these items have good value here, then I don't really need to sell them at a shop, right? And I have to raise intimacy to gain information... What if I sell them to Merpeople in the city?'

He could raise intimacy. Granted, there is a limit when raising intimacy by trading. But if he raises his intimacy to a certain level, he would naturally earn the favor of the Merpeople and might come to learn of another method to raise intimacy.

"I'm sorry. I will return."

"H-hey, wait!"

Ark quickly packed his things and left the shop.

The place Ark sought was the plaza situated at the center of the city, where many Merpeople gathered. Then he found a decent place and spread out land items. When the first Human they ever saw started spreading out items they have never seen before, Ark became the center of the Merpeople's attention.

"Huh? It's a human."

"How did it get here?"

"But what are those goods? What exactly are they made of?"

"It is sparkling? Perhaps it's what you call iron?"

In Nodelesse, iron was something difficult to even catch a glimpse of, there was no way to mine iron ores and refine them underwater. Clam shells, rock, and bones were substituted for iron.

Ark sent out a greeting to the Merpeople who gathered like clouds around him. When it came to selling things, it was something he had done countless of times in reality.

Of course it was his first time having fishes as customers...

"Merpeople with beautiful silver tails, I greet you. I am a Human who is by chance enjoying the honor of visiting the gorgeous city of Nodelesse. They call me Ark."

"Beautiful silver tail, hmm, it's the truth"

Merpeople are simple. He figured it out by taking to the Mermen guards. Just

a little bit of sugar coating can instantly raise intimacy, but declining was also instantaneous.

"Today, I will show everyone a couple of items found on land."

Ark skillfully explained like a celebrity who hosts a shopping channel.

"What you are seeing now are various armors made of animal hides which cannot be acquired underwater. In addition, there are iron weapons made with the hearts and souls of Humans. Ah, I know what you are thinking. You must be thinking the performance is subpar. However, these products I'm selling, are not meant for you to use."

"Are you saying we should buy something we're never going to use?"

"You do not understand? Think carefully again. The performance alone isn't comparable to the great weapons of the Merpeople, but they are all made of materials unobtainable underwater. In other words, no matter how thoroughly you look, only one of these items exist in Nodelesse! Only those who purchase them from me can enjoy the right to possess them."

"So that's how it is!"

"For those who still don't quite get it, close your eyes and imagine. Land monsters you cannot even take a glimpse at here. A monster clearing the forest and racing across the plains has been defeated after a fierce struggle by a Warrior. Then it left its hide and was changed into gear such as this. These aren't just items. They are items filled with the history and a touch of the adventurer who hunted the monster galloping down the plains. You can decorate your living room with this. When will there ever be such a luxury

underwater again?"

The light in the eyes of the Merpeople looking at the item changed.

Land monsters which cannot be seen or heard underwater! There was no practicality for either a glove or a shoe. But simply purchasing a single sword, they could imagine a world they had never seen.

This mentality stimulated the Merpeople's desire to purchase the items.

Of course, Ark's Art of Communication special stat was applied and it had a large influence on convincing the Merpeople. Art of Communication didn't demonstrate much of an effect in normal stores. But in a special case such as now, it caused profound influence.

"What is this made out of?" A Mermaid child pointed at the glove as it asked.

Ark sported his most friendly expression as he answered, "Ah, it's a leather of a monster called Magal Wolf. Its whole body is covered with black fur, and countless sharp canines are embedded within its gigantic mouth. They looked like they can swallow a person whole. Try touching it. You can imagine the monster called Magal Wolf by the touch it, right?"

"Whoa, feels amazing."

"H-how much is it?" A Merman who couldn't wait anymore fretted as he asked.

'They're hooked! The fish is hooked!'

"There isn't a set price. The quantity is limited, so please understand. I will

award the honor to the one who calls out the highest price. First, this glove this cute child showed interest in!"

"50P!"

"60P!"

When he finished talking, the Merpeople called out prices frighteningly.

At best, they were goods he could only get 10 Silver on land. But 60P! One pearl was 10 Silver, so it amounted to 60 Silver, 10 times the price!

Ark wanted to hit the ground and wail.

'If I knew this was going to happen, I should have brought anything and everything japtem...'

Not even a few minutes later 20 or so japtem were sold like hot cakes.

Whenever his florid speech raised the price, his Art of Communication also rose. When he had cleaned out all his goods, his Art of Communication stat rose by 13, and he also gathered 450 pearls. Of course, all the Merpeople who bought the goods left with satisfied faces, so his intimacy also rose considerably.

But they still wouldn't tell him about Christin.

Ark didn't worry. 'There should be a strategy even in an unexpectedly ridiculous place!'

After finishing his successful business, Ark became confident.

'Cultural difference is money!'

Nodelesse was completely segregated from land, and that fact held the strategy to raise intimacy. Something completely useless on land had unexpected effects here. As long as he found out what those were, it was no problem to raise intimacy.

Ark immediately gathered information as he wandered through Nodelesse.

What came next to Ark's attention was the restaurant.

The Merpeople had no concept of cooking. Even if you ordered food at a restaurant, only raw seaweed and shellfish were served.

It was inevitable. Fire cannot be used underwater.

However it was different for Ark. The Survival Cooking Pot Ark possessed could boil water without fire, and roast ingredients regardless of time and place! Just like the name 'Survival Cooking' implied, as long as you put your heart into making something, you could even make ramen underwater.

'They'll eat it. Without a doubt, they'll eat it.'

Ark immediately started a food stand in the plaza.

He had so many ingredients left, to the point where they'd rotted and became overripe.

Among the dishes Ark could make with the ingredients he had, Ark chose

several good tasting dishes with decent effects. The result was just as he expected.

Merpeople had never even seen cooked food before.

They couldn't even imagine food made from land ingredients. The Merpeople went as far paying an exorbitant fee of 1P per serving and ate the food. And the word-of-mouth of the Merpeople who had eaten it once spread from tail to tail, and long lines formed day after day at Ark's food stall.

Ark made the menu more varied as the sale improved. An invigorating meal with the effect of Health recovery and a nutritious meal raising Strength or Agility were the vanguard. Those special food were priced at a colossal price of 3P! It was really a gimmick to raise the price and receive more profit.

"Ohh, what is this?"

"Wow, it's such a fascinating taste."

"Is this what they call land meat?"

"For some reason, when I eat food from there, I feel my strength rising."

In a single day, the ingredients from land became scarce. But the business stayed as prosperous as ever.

"This is the seaweed I've always eaten, but the taste is completely different!"

"I can't believe it. How can you make such distinctive taste with shellfish!"

From children to elderly, from Guards to Nobles of the Merpeople, they didn't spare their praises.

Some Merpeople brought their lovers and strutted as they ordered food. Of

course Ark, who had a sense for customer treatment, satisfied the Merpeople with services second only to first-class restaurants.

Thanks to his customer service, his popularity soared even more. Soon the line of Merpeople who waited at dawn was long enough to surround the plaza.

"Welcome!"

"Give me the baked shellfish I ate yesterday."

"You need to wait 10 minutes."

It was difficult to handle the customers who kept coming even though he made food without rest. In just a few days, Ark became so famous, there wasn't a single Merperson in Nodelesse who didn't know of him.

But it was only the beginning.

"Ah, this is also almost to the point of breaking. Do I need to buy a new one?"

Guards who sought out the stall sighed while looking at the tattered armor.

Ark rapidly approached and put on a friendly smile.

"If it is okay, could I repair the equipment?"

"What do you mean repair? Surely you're not saying you'll fix it?"

"Yes, it won't be in the same state as before, but you'll still be able to use it for awhile."

"But I have never heard of a human repairing Merpeople's equipment?"

"For now, please give it to me."

The Guard took off and gave him the seashell armor with an expression of disbelief.

The concept of maximum durability didn't apply to the equipment of Merpeople. Since the materials used to make them were seashells, they couldn't be fixed after they were broken. Even for someone who learned the technique from a Blacksmith cannot repair a seashell with a hammer. But the technique Ark had learned was Magic Restoration. It wasn't the concept of repair, but restoring to its original state.

"Magic Restoration!"

When the skill was used, the tattered armor went back to its original condition.

At the sight, the Merpeople couldn't hide their astonishment. Granted, since it was still a beginner skill, it didn't completely return to original. 10% penalty was applied and durability only recovered by 90%.

A player would refuse the services even if they were paid. But this alone was a shock to the Merpeople. Since one equip was over 1,000P, replacing one was a big deal.

"You are truly incredible! Even a Magician wouldn't be able to do something like this!"

Ark spoke while gasping, pretending to be tired, "Huff huff huff, it's very

difficult when I use this technique."

"No wonder, since you did something remarkable. This isn't much, but take it."

The guard readily pulled out 50P.

It was better than selling 20 special cooking!

Ark's pupils flashed with golden light again.

'Nice. I was getting worried since there's a limit to the ingredients.'

"It's too regretful to simply throw away the great equipment of the Merpeople when they are broken. It's difficult for me, but if you have something broken, please bring it to me any time. If it's a normal item, I will repair it for a cheap price."

When the rumors spread, all the Merpeople brought their equipment and swarmed around Ark.

'Hahaha this is truly a cinch.'

He was so happy, he might turn insane.

He used ingredients he couldn't sell in the store to earn Pearls. Was that all? Every time he cooked, he raised his Survival Cooking skill. As he used Magic Restoration while earning Pearls, he was also able to raise its skill proficiency. As a result, the proficiency rose insanely and he raised the Magic Restoration level in three days.

Magic Restoration has risen to Intermediate through a great deal of experience.

The usual penalty you received when repairing normal items is gone. It is now possible to repair Magical Items. However, each time you repair a magic item, its maximum durability will decrease by 10%.

Mana Consumption: 20

* Since both the Nursing and Magic Restoration skill have become Intermediate, you have learned Purification Restoration as an effect of set skills. With Purification Restoration, you can purify curses on any kind of item.

'Set skill effect!'

In the past, he learned Sword-Hand Combat as a set effect of Sword Mastery and Hand-to-Hand Combat. When a couple related skills grow to a certain level, a set effect is given. But seeing it was a skill to lift curses, with Nursing and Magic Restoration being uncommon skills, this set effect was rare kind. Now he could release the curse of items without paying money to the Cathedral.

'Lancel's Sword!'

Lancel's Sword immediately came to mind.

Until now, it was maddening to wonder what kind of sword it was.

"Alright, Purification Restoration!"

Once the Sword's curse was lifted, a message window popped up with a new sound effect.

- Once the curse was released, the Sword's original appearance has materialized.

Lancel's Sword (Magic Sword)

Weapon Type	One-Handed Sword		
Attack	20~30	Durability	50/50
Weight	25	Usage Restriction	Dark Attribute, Level 50

A Sword used by the Mercenary Lancel, who was famed in the past. The reason why Lancel became notorious was due to the magic sword he wielded corrupting his mind. Lancel realized this and didn't utilize the sword for a long time, but he took up the Sword again to exterminate Kundalini, where he then drew his last breath and died.

'It's.. it's the jackpot!' Ark's mouth was wide open with surprise.

Ark was still using the Sharply Shining Sword he had earned from defeating the Black Bear Mouse. The sword's attack is 8-12, whereas Lancel's Sword was 20-30.

Just by looking at the attack power, it was a perfect sword to use at level 50. Unfortunately, there was a restriction of Dark Attribute.

The players Ark knew with the Dark Attribute were so few that he could count them on one hand. Despite it being a rare-class item, it would be difficult to get a high price at the auction. However, there was no reason to be disappointed.

'Lancel's Sword would immediately raise collective attack power by at least 30 percent.'

That alone gave it plenty of value.

Just then, another new message window popped up.

The Magic Tool's ability was drawn out by the Dark Walker's job characteristic.

Netherworld residents who are at least Intermediate class all possess their own artifact, which they call Magic Tools. Players can activate Magic Tool once a day. You can summon the host of the Magic Sword, who hides in the Netherworld. No kinds of environmental penalties apply to the entity summoned as the Magic Sword's host.

However, the Magic Sword's host is not friendly to players.

Job Special : If the player who owns the sword has the ability to summon creatures of the Netherworld, you are qualified to make the Familiar and the host of the Magic Sword duel. If the Familiar wins, you can combine the two entities to evolve into a stronger Familiar.

If the player attacks and uses hostile magic to side with the Familiar during the duel, the duel will automatically end in a defeat. In the cases the Familiar loses, it will be forcefully recalled and the appropriate penalty will apply.

Lancel's Sword's (Magic Sword)

Special Effect: Once a day, you can summon the low-class Vampire Dunphil.

'What is this?' Ark had a puzzled expression when he saw the never before seen message.

After reading it a couple of times, without being mindful of his surroundings he exclaimed.

'A Familiar's growth!'

They were words that made his eyes pop. Truthfully, Ark was feeling slightly doubtful about developing his Familiars, since the condition to develop Familiars was too peculiar.

Newly made dishes with Survival Cooking. However even if the cooking

succeeded, if the added effects were negative, the Familiars wouldn't grow. So although he had created about 80 new dishes, his Familiars' stats had only risen about thirty times. And since Skull and Bat split the consumption, it was only fifteen times.

If the risen stats were converted to levels, they were only about level 15, even though Ark had leveled up over 30 times while cooking ceaselessly. Moreover, no matter how many kinds of ingredients there were in New World, there was a limit.

In conclusion, the amount of new dishes Ark can make is limited. Eventually, the Familiar's growth would stop.

Right now they were overcoming the level difference against monsters with tactics, but it would also reach its limit one day.

When it happens, he might have to give up on his Familiars. But before it happens, he has to develop them a little more. The Familiars, who had no thoughts of rushing up to level, trembled uncontrollably at the mere sight of food...

Anyway, it was regrettable for Ark, who had special affection for his Familiars.

'But now there was another method!'

After ending his sale in the evening, Ark went outside Nodelesse.

The reason being: combat cannot be done inside the city.

"Magic Sword summon!"

Once Ark released the seal, a monster was summoned with hazy light. It had the appearance of a middle-aged man in a suit.

Dunphil glanced around, studied Ark, and smirked. "You summoned me? What is your business?"

Its expression and manner of speech were incomparably arrogant.

It was when Ark was about to say something.

"DU-DUNPHIL!" While staring blankly at Dunphil, Bat screamed.

But Dunphil's response was apathetic.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Y-you don't know me?"

"You are a strange one, I wouldn't know the likes of a bat without even a name."

"WH-WHAT? THIS BASTARD!"

Without even a chance to interfere, Bat charged at Dunphil.

It seemed it was decided Dunphil would be Bat's opponent.

Once the fight between the Familiars began, a message came up and all Ark could do was watch. He couldn't even use Nursing or recall his summon.

Ark took a step back together with Skull and used Eyes of the Cat to watch the fight. Dunphil's level was 25. On the other hand, when looking at Bat with its level 15 stats, the level difference was apparent throughout the fight.

Whenever Dunphil's attack hit, Bat's health fell by 10%. Even so, Bat blindly pushed forward.

As if Bat forgot all the fighting experience it had gained with Ark, it recklessly charged at Dunphil.

"Bat, carefully lengthen the fight!"

They were underwater. Dunphil doesn't get environment penalty. He wasn't at a disadvantage of not being able to breath underwater and experienced any movement hindrance. He can move naturally even underwater. While on the other hand, Bat received underwater penalty and couldn't display the greatest advantage of a winged beast — mobility. The difference was very large.

It was a disadvantageous fight from the beginning.

If Bat had a slight chance of winning, it was to use its experience of underwater battle and drag the fight on. But since Bat was only thinking about charging in and dealing damage, he couldn't have a proper fight.

Bat didn't even pretended to have heard Ark's advice.

"I'll kill you! I WILL KILL YOU!"

"Kekeke, you dare to come at me with your level of skill, how laughable!"

"KUAAAAAK!"

In the end, Bat's Health hit rock bottom after Dunphil's claw attack. Bat faded away while gnawing at Dunphil's shoulder.

"How insignificant. The business is settled now, yeah?"

"Yes. F—k off."

"If you're going to make me fight, it would be better to bring someone more commendable."

Dunphil disappeared while speaking with an arrogant expression. In the end, the first fight ended in vain.

'That Bat!'

Ark exploded in rage. Dunphil's scumbag attitude was bad too, but what made him even angrier was Bat. Thoughtlessly rushing in and tear? The fight was so absurd, it made Ark's face go hot. What the hell had Bat learned while fighting alongside Ark until now?

Ark had returned to the city and spent 24 hours doing business.

"Hey, Bat! The hell was THAT?" After resummoning, Ark castigated Bat with a stormy expression.

But he couldn't keep speaking.

Once it was summoned, Bat bawled as it ground its teeth.

"WAAAAAH, DAMMIT, DAMMIT!"

"Huh? What? Are you putting on a show because I'm angry?"

"Master, I beg you! Call that bastard again! I have to fight with him!"

"What the hell are you saying? Explain so I can understand!"

"That bastard... that bastard is the one who harassed me for over 10 years in the Netherworld."

"What?"

Bat ground its teeth as it spoke.

Dunphil was a low-ranking noble in the Netherworld. The arrogant and ill-tempered Dunphil harassed weak monsters as a hobby, and for the most part, its target was Bat.

Bat, who was born as a relative of the Vampire race, was constantly harassed by Dunphil. In addition, he was ostracized by the other bats as per Dunphil's instructions. In the end he was exiled from the race.

'Now that I think about it, this guy...'

Bat's original name was 'Hatred-bearing Bat.'

An explanation how Bat came to bear hatred and rage towards the world because it suffered harassment in the Netherworld; had been attached in its description.

'In such a setting, it can't be helped for this rascal to fight Dunphil.'

After thinking for a while, a wicked smile blossomed on Ark's lips.

'It's a chance.'

"I understand the situation, however I can't let you immediately fight Dunphil."

"Ma-Master!"

"If you fight like the way you did the day before, no matter how much you fight, you can't win against him. You will lose. And if you don't want to lose again listen to me. First, you need to get stronger."

Bat was startled. Getting stronger; in other words, it meant he had to eat food.

However Bat grit its teeth and nodded. "I understand, if I can win against him I will do anything."

"Alright, and another thing, you can't fight like you did before. He's stronger than you. But not enough for you not to win. From today onwards, I'll train you."

Ark did business during the day and started training Bat at night. And when a new recipe came up, he immediately shoved it into Bat's mouth.

Food made with ocean ingredients had a high chance of having a good effect. Whenever it happened, Bat's stats went up.

Bat's training was sparring with Ark.

"Do it right! If you fight that way you can't win against Dunphil! Do you want to be beaten up again?"

"N-NO! I won't lose!"

Pow pow pow!

The days of gruesome training continued.

Unlike usual, although Bat got beaten up by Ark countless times, its fighting spirit burned. After finishing intense training for a few days, Ark called Dunphil out again and had them duel.

Though Bat's stats had risen a few times, it alone wasn't enough to oppose Dunphil yet. But since Bat's skills had greatly improved over the last few days, a battle far more stable than before unfolded.

"Huff huff huff, this, this much is far from it."

In the end it ended with Dunphil's victory again, but there wasn't as large of a margin as last time. Ark smiled coldly at Dunphil, who swaggered in a way unfitting for his appearance.

"It'll be harder next time."

"Hmph, even so, a bat is a bat."

Dunphil disappeared to the Netherworld as if it was running away.

'Damn, the problem is I have to wait 24 hours once it dies. Next time I'll allow him to fight when I am more confident he can win. Until I can resummon, I should make up the training schedule.'

Ark was busy doing business, raising his Familiar, and doing miscellaneous

things.

* * *

Ark accumulated Pearls while steadily doing business.

But when there is a high tide there is also low tide.

As time passed, even his lucrative business slowly died down. His land ingredients ran out so he squeezed out dishes with seaweed as its main ingredient, but since it was an ingredient the Merpeople were familiar with, it didn't hold their interest for very long.

The business of Magic Restoration also didn't gather customers easily after he repaired all the Guards' equipment. Since there wasn't a big war going on, there was no reason for the durability to drop quickly.

'For a business, it is more important to know when to stop than knowing when to start. Well, it wasn't something I could do for long anyway.'

In the end, Ark ended his business in ten days.

It was a business which earned him Pearls without a capital. It wasn't without regret, but he couldn't pick a spot and live in Nodelesse. Also, no matter how many Pearls he had, if he didn't change them into gold then there was no meaning. It was a business he had to stop eventually.

More than anything the reason Ark was able to leave the business without regret was because he already reached his initial goal. Ark was already a celebrity among the Merpeople.

Wherever he went, Merpeople recognized Ark and pretended to know him.

When he was doing business, there were huge fans who came to the restaurant without missing a single day. Finding out a piece of information wasn't even a problem.

"Do you happen to know someone by the name of Christin?"

"Christin you say..."

In the past there would've been immediate swearing first, but this time the circumstances were different.

The elderly Merman earnestly pondered and spoke, "There's nothing I can't tell if it's you, but actually, I don't know very much about a person named Christin either. It's not just me. There probably isn't a Merperson in Nodelesse who knows the details about him. It's a name everyone knows, but nobody knows who exactly he was."

"I don't understand. But then why does everyone get upset when I asked about him?"

"It's because we learned to act as such. I only heard from prideful Merpeople during my grandfather's grandfather's time that you had to hate him. But after listening to your words and thinking back on it, I didn't hear why we have to hate him."

He understood, why else would they be fish?

"Isn't there a way to find out?"

"Hmm...."

The old Merman contemplated for a while and answered as if he suddenly remembered something.

"Now that I think about it, there's a Crystal Pillar that records the history of the Merpeople in front of the Palace. I think I've heard something about him being recorded there too, though we don't know what it says because it's written in a language forgotten long ago. You who have many talents may be able to find a clue. Go there and try."

"Thank you."

"But are you closing down the restaurant now?"

"Yes, I don't have any ingredients left."

"How unfortunate. It was my sole pleasure..." The elderly Merman murmured while smacking his mouth.

Ark left the regular customer and headed directly to the Palace.

"Hey, Ark. What are you doing here?"

"I came after hearing there was a marvelous Crystal Pillar in front of the Palace."

"There is. It's quite a marvelous decoration."

"Could I come in and see it once?"

"Hm, that's a bit difficult..."

"I wish to learn more about the Merpeople whom I admire deep within my heart. I'll just glance at it and come out so please let me."

"Well, since it's your request and not someone else's, it can't be helped. I

understand, but you have to come out quick."

Since the intimacy was at maximum, everything was progressing at lightning speed.

Once he entered the Palace, he saw a Crystal Pillar not far from the entrance.

Bead-like writing was crammed all over the surface of the 10 meter high Crystal Pillar.

'To progress with the quest do I need to decipher this?'

It was when Ark's hand touched the surface of the pillar. Light suddenly poured out from the pillar and countless images flashed in front of him.

* * *

A beautiful Mermaid was seated on a balcony overlooking all of Nodelesse. It was a Mermaid with brilliant shoulder-length blond hair and sapphire blue eyes.

She was watching the back of a man with unbearable sadness in her eyes. It was a big, strong, perfectly reliable back, but at that moment it filled her with complete despair and anguish. Because the back couldn't become hers.

The man's back slowly grew distant.

The Mermaid cried and cried as she watched the man's back getting farther away from the balcony.

Tears distinctively appeared within the transparent ocean.

Then the scene changed.

The Mermaid clutched the items retaining the man's scent to her chest and left for somewhere. The currents drawn by her beautiful tail conveyed keen sadness.

Christin, Christin, I love you.

Even if all the water in the ocean were to dry up, I'd still love you.
Even if I have to bear the stabbing pain in my chest I'd still love you.

I believe in your promise.
As promised, I believe you will return and find me.
Until then, I will wait for you at the promised place.

Please do not forget the words I whispered with you.
If you want to see me, close both of your eyes.

In a hidden place, I will wait for the day I can be in your arms.

* * *

Through the Knowledge of Ancient Relics, you have discovered the Crystal Pillar's hidden information.

The yearning of a Mermaid for her lover is recorded inside the Crystal Pillar.

For the lover who would find her someday, she carved this in ancient letters.
However, sadly, it seems like her love did not come to be.

Knowledge of Ancients +5, Intelligence increased by 5, Luck increased by 2,
Fame increased by 10.

'So basically this is a love letter. She wrote a very grandiose love letter.'

CRAAAACK!

Then the image disappeared.

Suddenly, spiderweb-like cracks appeared on the Crystal Pillar, and without time to even do anything it came crashing down. The Guards who gathered after hearing the commotion shouted with astonished expressions.

"Th-The pillar!"

"It's him. The stranger who ran the restaurant broke the pillar!"

"You bastard, what have you done!"

Ark was stunned because he didn't know what was going on. Fifteen guards surrounded him and pushed forward with their raised Spears of coral.

"You dare to intrude the castle and break the ruin!"

"N-no, I don't know how this happened either..."

"QUIET! Drag this Human away immediately!"

* * *

Ark suddenly had to spend a day in prison.

After logging off for half a day and coming back in, a Merman in scale armor appeared.

"The Queen wants to see you. Follow me."

Mermen dragged Ark to the throne room.

Merpeople in noble attire were lined up in the ruby throne room. At their center sat a beautiful female Mermaid who looked to be over the age of 30. Since she was decorated with jewels and wore a crown, it seemed she was the Queen of the Merpeople. But her face was familiar.

Ark easily understood the reason.

'She looked similar to the Mermaid I saw in the Crystal Pillar.'

The Nobles of the Merpeople made a fuss when Ark entered.

"For a stranger to sully the Palace ruins, it's unheard of."

"We must deal with him appropriately with severe punishment."

"But since there is no precedence...."

"The fact this stranger entered the Palace is alone enough to punish him."

"However, the Merpeople have always upheld fairness, so even if he had committed the crime, should we not assess the situation beforehand and make a ruling?"

The opinion of the Merpeople Nobles were split in two.

Simply put, it was the opinion of the Nobles who had been Ark's customers and those who weren't. It was probably because of them that Ark, who damaged the royal ruins wasn't executed immediately. If he'd been forcefully

deported, it would've been hopeless.

'This was definitely something that should have only been done after raising intimacy.'

The Queen raised her hand to silence everyone and looked at Ark.

"I understand because I heard the words of the nobles, but a stranger damaging the Palace ruins is unprecedented. Of course it is an incident deserving of a heavy punishment. However, I have found the residents of Nodelesse to have great confidence in you. There are even volunteers who wish to take up your defense. It is not easy for a stranger to earn trust. Therefore I will give you a chance to explain. Now, why did you destroy the pillar?"

"I had no intention of destroying it. I just wanted to know about the person named Christin and simply touched it with my hand, but it was destroyed on its own."

"Christin!"

The Merpeople Nobles opened their eyes wide and looked at each other. The Queen also gathered her brows in considerable surprise and asked back, "Are you someone with relations to Christin?"

"I don't know."

"You said the name Christin yourself, but you don't know?"

"Yes, it's true I was searching for him, but it's hard to say I have relations with him. Rather, I want to know more, since I left on a journey to find out

who he is and what kind of relation he has with me, so I came all the way here. But no one would tell me about Christin. So I placed my last hopes and approached the pillar."

"Christin is a traitor who betrayed the trust of the Merpeople." A fire of rage burned in the Queen's eyes.

"Traitor?"

"It seems you still need more explanation."

At Ark's response, the Queen sighed and continued, "Christin was the man loved by the Queen who ruled the Merpeople before the start of the Dark Century. During that time, the Merpeople were trading with many races while sharing conversations. But then the Queen went out to the land, and she fell in love with a young man."

"The name of that person is?"

"Yes, it is Christin."

He heard about the Dark Century from the Meow. It was the time when the powers of darkness had covered the world and thus was called the Dark Century. Then the 7 Heroes appeared and finally, the days of light returned. So if he was from before the Dark Century, Cristin was a figure from hundreds of years ago.

"But Merpeople cannot live on land. In the end, the Queen had to return to the sea, but she promised to meet again with her lover and gave him the Compass of the Sea God as a token of her love."

"Compass of the Sea God?"

"Originally, Nodelesse was an illusory city that wandered the sea. Even Merpeople had a hard time finding it again if they left the city. However, the Compass of the Sea God always shined light towards Nodelesse so you wouldn't get lost. It was the Queen's greatest treasure. Giving him the Compass of the Sea God was the same as giving him everything, so he could come find her whenever he wanted."

'Is she talking about the Jeweled Hand Mirror?'

Ark followed the Hand Mirror's guidance and reached Nodelesse. Since the name Christin is written on it, there is no doubt.

"But did he not come find her?"

"No, he came as promised. He was a stranger to the Merpeople, but we truly welcomed and accepted the man the Queen loved. But his love didn't even last one year. In the end he threw away the Queen and returned to the land. Can you imagine? The sadness of a woman who was thrown away by the man whom she gave everything to?"

The Queen's voice became emotional.

"The queen shut herself in her room and spent her night in tears. Then after more than ten years, she suddenly hid herself. Not after long, a great calamity befell upon Nodelesse."

"Calamity?"

"Since long, long ago, Nodelesse received the protection of an existence

called Gallic, a great White Whale. Gallic, who had shared a spiritual connection with the Queen for generations, is the master of the ocean and the guardian deity of the Merpeople. But after the Queen disappeared, Gallic became uncontrollably vicious."

"Are you saying it was Christin's fault?"

"If it wasn't, then whose is it? The Queen cursed Christin, who threw her away. It's certain her feelings and the weight of her curse made Gallic, who was spiritually connected, go mad. In the end, it was Christin's fault Nodelesse's lost its past glory."

"There is no way!" Ark spoke with a determined voice.

The Queen's forehead scrunched at the unexpected objection. "What did you say?"

"I do not know the whole story. However, I am certain the Queen did not hate or resent Christin. Rather, she tried to understand why he had no choice but to leave. The reason why she disappeared is probably connected to his departure as well."

"How could you, who didn't even know who Christin was, know this?"

"It was written on the Crystal Pillar."

The Merpeople Nobles stirred with shocked expressions at Ark's reply.

The Queen asked quickly with an expression of disbelief, "Did you decipher the meaning of the pillar?"

"That is correct."

"Lies, it's a lie!"

"Yes, he is just babbling because he wants to avoid punishment. You mustn't be tricked."

The Merpeople Nobles flailed as they shouted.

"It is not a lie. If you truly cannot believe it, I will show you the proof."

"Proof?"

"The Queen was in possession of the item Christin left behind. It was an important item she treasured greatly. If we find the item, we'll know his true feelings towards her and the reason why she disappeared."

"Didn't I say we don't know where she disappeared to?"

"There is no need to think hard about it. If Gallic suddenly became violent after she disappeared, the answer is there. Please tell me where Gallic is. I will find the answer."

"So it can be thought of that way too. I've also tried sending Soldiers to calm Gallic several times. But Gallic is the Master of the Sea who wanders the ocean; a Warrior of the Merpeople cannot find Gallic. The sole way to find Gallic is the Compass of the Sea God."

"Then it's all the more reason why I should go."

Ark pulled out the Jeweled Hand Mirror from his bag.

The Queen's eyes widened to an unbelievable size.

After staring blankly at the hand mirror with surprised eyes, the Queen barely managed to stammer after a long while, "M-my goodness... for the lost Compass of the Sea God to return after hundreds of years..."

Ark interrupted, not giving her a chance to speak.

"I won't talk long for much longer. You know the items inside a stranger's bag cannot be taken by anyone without the permission of the owner, yes? There is a reason why I must find out why the person named Christin left her. So, please help me find Gallic."

"Perhaps... This may be the final chance. Okay."

The Queen thought for a while and nodded.

"If you look at the back of the Compass of the Sea God, jewels of three colors should be embedded. If you arrange the jewels one space to the left, it will lead you to Gallic."

Thu-thu-thump, the quest information was updated at last.

The quest has been updated.

Entrance to the New World → Guardian Deity of the Merpeople, Gallic

You have found out Christin's past and the ancestral Mermaid Queen who disappeared are connected.

By connecting the information of the Mermaid Queen to the Crystal Pillar, everything is related.

It is certain the ancestral Queen has an item related to Christin. In addition, her disappearance is likely connected to the Guardian Deity of the Merpeople, Gallic. You must find her whereabouts through Gallic and recover the item. You must also find a way to calm Gallic.

The Compass of the Sea God will guide you.

Difficulty: E

* * *

"Huff huff, this whale, you wanna play with me?"

Ark spat out curses while clearing countless meters of Kelp forest.

He had already been struggling in the sea for several days.

Only when Ark went out of Nodelesse did he feel overwhelming motivation.

He was thinking of stabbing the great White Whale or whatever in one blow and thus ending the quest.

From Shadow Forest to lighthouse, from lighthouse to Nodelesse, and doing business to gather information in Nodelesse. All in all, it took a month. But during that time he was able to raise his level many times, earned money, and gather items. For just one quest, he had invested tremendous amount of time.

'It feels like it's coming to an end now.'

But after leaving the city, it wasn't as simple as he thought.

Gallic wasn't far away from Nodelesse. The thicker the light from the compass, the closer he was to the goal. However, there was a problem he hadn't expected — the goal was constantly moving because it was a living whale.

"Did this guy run away again?"

He ran like no tomorrow, but the needle's light pointed to another direction before he knew it. He had always been one step behind for several days.

But when there is a will there is a way. After struggling in the ocean for a few days, Ark finally found a way to catch up to the whale.

It was the same current that swept him away when he was on his way to Nodelesse.

The currents entangled the area Gallic moved in like a spiderweb. You could think of it like hundreds of quickly moving escalators tangled in a building.

'If I use this...!'

Ark removed the Sharkman's Shackles and threw himself into a nearby current. Instantaneously, the landscape zipped by at a extremely high speeds. The coral reefs and schools of fishes swept past like the wind. The beauty he hadn't seen while struggling within them came to his view. Traveling by the current was yet another fascinating experience. After moving in the same direction for some time, the guiding light shifted to the side.

'Are you running away again? Not this time!'

Ark immediately moved to the current flowing next to him. After switching directions a few times, the light became thicker and then suddenly disappeared. It wasn't because he'd lost him, but he had arrived at his destination.

'It's around here somewhere.'

Ark grasped his sword. Suddenly, Bat said in voice trembling with nervousness, "Ma-master."

"I know. Get ready. It is nearby."

"N-No, that is not it. There..."

Bat's voice trembled more and more.

He turned his head to see what was the matter, but he saw nothing.

"What's wrong?"

"You don't see it? The mountain... is moving."

"What?"

It was when Ark turned his head to follow Bat's gaze.

The vast background obstructing the view in front of him twitched as it moved. An enormous amount of sand dust rose and clouded the water. Within it, something glossy moved.

"May-maybe that is Gallic....?"

The round object of enormous size turned just then towards Ark!

What were as big as buildings were shockingly its eyes. The enormous background that had been its eyes slowly rose. Bat, Skull, and Ark's eyes also looked up trying to follow it.

He stopped to catch his breath.

Calling it gigantic is nowhere enough to this overwhelming creature.

Ark had felt this feeling before when he was young. It was the same feeling when looking up at Mt. Seorak or Mt. Halla from the mountain base. If there was a difference between them, it was the mountain in front of him being a living creature, a moving organism.

'White Whale, Gallic!' His voice didn't come out.

Ridiculous! No matter how big, isn't it too big?

Did he really have to fight something like this? An ant bit a person. The angered person crushed the ant. You couldn't call it a fight.

Right now Ark was no different from an ant.

The Sword in Ark's hand wouldn't even give the gigantic creature a stinging feeling. In other words, it is like an ant losing all fear and biting a human.

Kuohhh!

The White Whale opened its mouth, revealing a space like a tunnel with a 50-lane road. Simultaneously an enormous pull sucked Ark in.

"WAAAAAAAH!" Ark screamed with all his strength.

Then he was swallowed by the White Whale.

The White Whale's Labyrinth

Outside Harun Village was a hunting ground where beginner players spent the night locked in desperate struggles with wolves.

It was here where a new player appeared.

A robust 40-year old man with a scraggly beard, his character name was JusticeMan. The player's real name was Gwon Hwarang, a man who had formerly held the extremely rare profession of a hot-blooded detective.

The first reaction JusticeMan showed was no different from anyone else's. He was surprised by the surrounding landscape looking so much like reality, and astounded by his body moving so naturally.

As the beginner appeared, Hansen, who'd been strolling around with nothing to do, quickly started a conversation. Then, when he suggested the mouse hunting quest, JusticeMan scratched his beard as he asked, "But is it a really difficult task?"

"No, don't worry. It's something anyone can do. I'm trying to introduce suitable tasks to strangers like you who are here for the first time and haven't adapted yet."

"If that's so, then it's okay. When a truly pressing matter arises, please call me then."

JusticeMan nodded a goodbye and exited the village. As always, he was limping on one leg.

As a game that moves the character by scanning the brain, in New World there were no problems with physical disabilities. For someone who couldn't move their legs at all and even the blind, could walk and see like normal inside the game. Because of this, even in hospitals, virtual reality games were prescribed as one of the therapies to treat a disabled person's depression.

However, there were many cases where a person's physical disability had hardened into a habit. This was also the case for JusticeMan. If anything, 2 years of limping on one leg had caused him to forget the sensation of walking normally. Nevertheless, his limping leg was not a big obstacle when it came to playing the game.

JusticeMan left the village, his eyes widened in surprise. Across the wide plain, players were locked in desperate struggles with wolves. Also, they were fighting with swords and clubs, not guns.

It was a scene unimaginable in real life.

Then, he heard a woman's scream to the side.

"Kya, he-help me!"

As he turned his head the sight of a female player being viciously attacked by a Wild Dog came to his view.

"Halt!"

While taking his coat off and throwing it aside, JusticeMan blocked the Wild Dog's path.

As a new enemy appeared, the Wild Dog assessed him with a wary eye. But it noticed it was a beginner user who wasn't wielding any weapons; the Wild Dog let out a mocking laugh. A murderous look lit up in its eyes and a threatening growl came out from its fang-filled mouth.

Those who were new to virtual reality gaming should have been frightened. However, instead of being afraid, a refreshing smile actually spread on JusticeMan's lips.

'A sensation like this, it's been a while. It reminds me of the time I went on a tour out of duty in South America.'

Bark! Bark! Bark!

The Wild Dog suddenly charged. JusticeMan's pupils moved quickly as he read the Wild Dog's movements.

'An opening!'

JusticeMan's body moved.

With movements like flowing water, neither could be called fast nor slow, he seized the Wild Dog by its scruff. Then while rotating his body he tossed the Wild Dog over his head.

With incomprehensible strength, the Wild Dog flew several meters before it was driven into the ground, and lost a fourth of its health.

It was a shoulder throw similar to a picture in a judo textbook!

That's right, before he retired, JusticeMan had been a legendary high-ranking judo wrestler even in the police department.

In the National Police Judo Tournament, he had won several times and was a skillful man who had always contended for the first and second places in the worldwide tournament as well. But where his ability truly shined was not in a tournament.

He had work experience in special police force taking down organized crime, a counterterrorism task force, and had even been deployed to South America as a police department instructor representing South Korea in an international treaty. It wasn't an exaggeration to say JusticeMan was a legendary person on the battlefield.

Wielding only a short police baton, he swept away the criminal gangs armed with knives and shotguns, and once he had single-handedly driven away a pack of wild dogs that had raided a village in South America. It was to the

point where the South American policemen had called that JusticeMan the Monster of the East.

In others' eyes it might seem like perilous work, but JusticeMan felt he had the right aptitude for this line of work.

His irrepressible sense of justice and his raging vigor couldn't possibly be satisfied by an ordinary life. Although he was living in a modern society, he held the spirit of a medieval knight who revered martial arts and justice more than anything else.

'I haven't even been able to properly train in a while, but it seems the feeling hasn't died yet.'

The spirit that had been broken by the aftermath of his injury was revived.

For him, the likes of a Wild Dog was no different from a puppy.

The Wild Dog sprang up quickly and swung its front paw. As a thick, bloody line was drawn across his abdomen, JusticeMan lost half of his health. Since a level 1 player was struck by a level 4 Wild Dog, this was a natural result. But rather than fear, what JusticeMan felt was excitement.

"That's good. It wouldn't be fun if you went down with just that."

JusticeMan's heavy body went low to the ground like a swallow as he approached. He took hold of the Wild Dog before it could even react and twisted its forelegs.

One of his strong points was his cross arm break!

The Wild Dog's forelegs gave a popping sound and were dislocated. However the Wild Dog didn't even have time to scream. JusticeMan twisted around in a flash and switched to a choke hold. Its health fell steadily as if it was being sucked away by a straw.

After the Wild Dog was taken care of, the girl approached hesitatingly.

“Th-Thank you.”

JusticeMan’s eyes trembled.

He had helped and received thanks.

It was a feeling he had long forgotten for such a long time!

While employed as a detective, he had caught countless criminals. That was definitely justice. But cases where he received thanks after an incident was solved were rare. Since he was a detective, catching criminals was a granted.

It was the truth. JusticeMan truly didn’t catch criminals to receive thanks. But those who made this goal difficult were not the criminals.

When a criminal was caught, he had to hear the resentful curses of their family. Also if even the slightest wound was inflicted, it would rouse human rights groups and the media who would call it excessive retribution. Even as he was lying in hospital after injuring his leg, outside the voices blamed him nonstop. A news reporter even used a ladder truck to plaster himself to the window and take pictures.

His superiors placed all responsibility onto him.

For the first time, JusticeMan felt doubt about his profession.

He had only wanted to fulfill the justice taught to him in police academy. The bad needed to receive punishment and the weak needed to be helped. That’s what he had learned and wanted to live by.

But reality wasn’t as simple. He felt like he had become a useless dropout that was thrown away.

‘But it’s different here!’

He would be thanked if he helped out. There was no one to accuse him of using excessive force. He was able to unleash to his heart's content the passion of a martial artist that he had abandoned after becoming disabled.

‘It’s here. This is the place I was looking for!’

Motivation overflowed.

From then on, JusticeMan began defeating the Wild Dogs while roaming the plains. Whenever someone looked as if they were going to be struck down by the Wild Dogs, he would always intervene and help out. The Wild Dogs were fine, but there were times when he died trying to help a player being attacked by several Wolves. But JusticeMan didn’t say a single word in complaint. Instead he gave a hearty laugh as if he had done what he naturally had to do.

There were even some players who were impressed and tried to reward him.

“JusticeMan-nim, this is just cheap wheat bread but please have it.”

“Your coat is worn out? If you’re okay with only 2 defense...”

JusticeMan firmly shook his head.

“Receiving compensation conflicts with my principles... No, justice needs no reward.”

Then, he would run off like a gust of wind to find another person calling for help.

While going about and defeating Wild Dogs and Wolves at level 1, his level rose quickly. Without looking through the stat window that popped up before JusticeMan’s eyes, he invested everything into Strength and Stamina.

“For men it has to be Strength and Stamina!”

As he repeatedly fought in highly difficult battles, a new skill and a new stat was formed.

You have learned a new skill.

Jujitsu (Beginner, Passive): You have learned Jujitsu, which is based on a foundation of excellent physical ability and reflexes.

Jujitsu is a skill which uses the opponent's strength against them to inflict damage. It is a complex grappling technique completely assimilating the oriental ideology of yin-yang.

Joint-locks used on human movements can have the additional effect of greatly reducing the enemy's ability to move. The damage inflicted on an enemy increases as the proficiency rises when throws, chokeholds, and joint-locks are used.

A new stat has been generated.

Justice (+5) : Justice is a special stat only available to those with a flaming sense of justice to help others.

When a player with the Justice stat joins a battle in order to give aid, all stats will increase by the number of Justice points. Resistance to Fear, Confusion, and Bewitchment is also created in accordance to the the number of justice points.

Everyone in New World has positive attitude towards anyone with Justice. Many people who recognize your talent will request help from you, and if

you help them, you can earn higher Intimacy. While stat distribution is impossible, it will increase slightly whenever you help others.

‘Is the Jujitsu talking about judo? And I can think of the Justice stat as a work evaluation.’

The Jujitsu was fine, but he took quite a liking to the stat called Justice. In the real word, even if you help others all you feel is self-satisfaction. Even if your teammates complimented you, they quickly forgot with the passing of time. But here, realizing justice manifested in a numerical value. He would immediately receive an amount that matched his efforts. The Justice stat fuelled JusticeMan’s burning passion.

The opinions of the players about JusticeMan’s actions were divided.

“There’s no way he’s a player. He doesn’t have a single dagger equipped and there’s no reason for him to go around without any armor.”

“What kind of player in the world would go as far as to die for someone else?”

“No player would use a name as awful as JusticeMan, either.”

“I’m sure he is a beginner friendly event NPC.”

“But he has asked about levels and stats sometimes? An NPC doesn’t do that.”

JusticeMan became a mystery of Harun village. And from some point onward, he was more often called Machoman instead of JusticeMan.

JusticeMan was more popular among players than NPCs.

“Hey, Machoman is surrounded by Wolves.”

“Let's go, we need to save Machoman!”

“But we don't have much Health right now either...”

“But we still have to help. We already received so much help from him, so we can't ignore him.”

“You're right, let's help Machoman!”

The Wolves who were attacking JusticeMan were dumbfounded.

Just 3~4 wolves were swarmed by 30 players. Among them, Roco, who'd been struggling in Harun Village all along, was also squeezed in.

* * *

“This is?”

When he was swallowed by Gallic he thought it was the end of everything. But Ark was still perfectly alive. While wondering how it happened, an information window suddenly popped up.

White Whale's Labyrinth

You have entered the stomach of the Great White Whale Gallic, who is called the guardian deity of the Merpeople. Within a body that transcends the

imagination, Gallic's stomach is also as complicated as a labyrinth.

As the guardian deity of the Merpeople, Gallic was an existence that loved peace, but with the ancient former Mermaid Queen's disappearance, he became violent and is now preying on sea life at random.

Gallic's change is likely linked with the dark energy enveloping his stomach.

- You have found an undiscovered dungeon.

As the new discoverer, you will earn an additional 1,200 experience and 100 Fame if you register it to the Hall of Fame. Will you register?

“Refuse registration.”

Ark answered as if it was obvious and stood up.

So far the only person who knew about the underwater city was Ark. There was no need to share valuable information.

‘So this is the inside of a whale stomach?’

The place Ark was standing on was a space full of rough bumps. It was slow, but the wall occasionally twitched as if there was a pulse.

He was amazed, but it seemed he had really entered Gallic's stomach.

In any case, it meant he had grasped a clue on the quest completion.

‘I’ll have to go in for now, huh?’

To think that he had to walk into the whale’s stomach on his own feet, it was a strange feeling. But before that, there was something he had to do first.

“Units, line up and count.”

“One.”

Clack clack

Hiss hiss

Bat, Skull and Snake answered in turn.

“Master, can’t we stop doing this? It’s embarrassing whenever we do this.”

“Be quiet, everything has a deep meaning. Skull and Snake seem to enjoy it, so why are you the only one complaining?”

“Tsk, it’s because these guys just don’t think.”

Ark dismissed Bat’s complaint and slowly advanced.

‘If this is a dungeon then there’ll definitely be enemies.’

As he entered while following the walls that squirmed like a wave, three Crabs soon appeared in front of him. However, they weren’t the normal Crabs he’d seen outside.

After being eaten and killed by the whale, they were Undead Crabs that had been revived by the dark energy. The Crabs, which were melting here and there and had cracked shells, discovered prey and approached as they snapped their claws.

“Eyes of the Cat!”

As he activated the skill, Ark’s pupils emitted a golden glow.

Level 65! The difference in level between them and the Crabs outside was a whopping 30. Ark’s current level was 52, it was the same as when he reached Nodelesse.

It was the result of neglecting combat to focus on business.

Since it was a dungeon, even with the darkness bonus he was still around 60; there was still close to a 5 level difference. He felt taut tension.

‘Even the level 40 Crabs weren’t easy opponents either...’

Underwater monsters were trickier than land monsters. Crabs had strong defence, and the bubbles they spewed whenever they reached critical condition had a Slow hex.

When Ark fought it for the first time, he was more than 10 levels higher, but it still wasn’t easy. Though he’d become used to it, it was certain that they would still be tough opponents. Moreover, at level 65, he couldn’t guarantee victory.

Ark tightened his grip on his sword's handle.

'This is the whale's stomach, there's no place to run.'

"Bat, Skull! Plan B!"

At his command, Bat and Skull quickly ran out and lured a Crab. Ark ran towards the remaining two Crabs and bombarded the red points with his sword.

Pow pow pow poww!

Ark's sword moved like a beam of light, and flashes of light burst from four weak points in one strike.

The Crab lost 30% of its health instantly and staggered.

The one who was surprised was not the Crab but Ark.

'Wh-what is this? This sensation?'

He didn't know until earlier, but when the battle started he felt an unbelievable sensation in various places of his body. His body was as light as a feather, and he felt like the sword he was holding was twirling peculiarly in his hand.

If he put his mind to it, he felt like he could attack 4, 5 or even 6 times. He was confident he could display a reaction or speed that was unimaginable in the past. Ark wondered if he had received a different stat bonus, but there was no such message.

‘Then maybe?’

Ark suddenly realized something; as he looked around, and knew the reason why he had changed.

‘I see, this is not underwater!’

Ark had spent more than half a month underwater. He battled with the Sharkman’s Shackles and accepted the water penalty like it was natural. Even in reality, he had raised his stamina while doing special training in the pool. But there were no changes that Ark could actually feel. It was only to the point that he could perform as well underwater as he could on land.

However Gallic’s stomach was not underwater, so here there was no water penalty for wearing the Sharkman’s Shackles.

The huge water penalty had disappeared in an instant. Strength, Agility, and reflexes felt like they had improved hundred times. No, it had been improved.

In the end, as Ark had expected, this life underwater had given him a chance to grow.

The difference in the sensation was shocking.

The Crab’s movements felt clear. When Ark lost the field of vision thanks to the Devil Fish’s ink, he dodged as many as 8 feet just by feeling the water current. He still had the same sensation.

When a Crab’s feet cut through the wind, Ark was able to sense it. The 4 legs

flew at him with complexity but Ark was able to dodge just by moving his upper body.

Crabs can only be attacked at their joints.

Although they were undead Crabs, their weak point were still the same. Against someone who broke through tens of Jellyfish tentacles, to hit the sole weak point on its center was nothing.

When comparing Crabs to Jellyfish, Crabs had weak points everywhere.

And since the water penalty disappeared...

- You have dealt a
Critical Hit!

Ark's attack was in perfect timing and place.

When accurately attacking the right spot with the right strength, critical strikes occur. The increased precision from training underwater was a godsend. In addition, Lancel's sword was twice as strong as his old one.

Taking care of the 2 level 65 Crabs didn't even lower his health by 30%.

'To think it felt this different!'

Feeling such a great change in an instant, Ark suffered from confusion. Ark was not the only one who had grown.

After Ark checked the Crab's level he calculated that Bat and Skull wouldn't

last very long against it. 1 minute, If all goes well. Given the situation, he would have to recall one summon. However Bat and Skull overturned his predictions.

The one who benefitted the most from the lack of water penalty was Bat.

In Nodelesse, it had been sparring with Ark and eating food constantly. Bat's evasion and attack had greatly improved. Additionally the disappearance of the water penalty was a stroke of good fortune.

He avoided the Crabs' attacks like an underwater swallow and only when an opening appeared did he fly with a full-body charge. The damage from a single shot was at a trifling level, but as his attack rate was so fast, the damage was not negligible. It wasn't as much as Bat's, but Skull also showed an alarming growth. As if Skull was trying to get revenge on them for a tragedy, he would roll around the Crabs' feet and tear at them with his teeth.

The 2 summons who were around a mere level 15, lured a level 65 Crab and in just a few minutes the Crab lost 40% of its health. When Ark joined in, the Crab didn't even had chance to spray bubbles.

“Ohhh, strangely I am overflowing with strength!”

Clack Clack!

“Master, a fight! Lets fight!”

Bat and Skull felt their growth and couldn't hold their excitement.

“Good, I was worried at first, but with this it won't be hard to solve the

quest.”

Ark started to conquer the dungeon.

From the twitching black walls, Crabs, Devil Fishes, and Sharkmen turned undead started to swarm them.

Even when they were undead, they were no different from the ones outside in the ocean. He already knew what kind of attacks they would do, and the weak points they had.

Also, his condition was so good, he felt as if he was flying.

“Bat, Skull! Plan A!”

There was no reason to bother luring with Skull and Bat.

Joining his familiars, Ark charged head on and chain of critical hits exploded. The co-op bonus with his Familiar’s attacks! Monsters’ health fell steadilyl.

This time, Ark noticed why the fight was easier. It was not because Ark became stronger, but because the monsters inside the whale were originally marine life. Similar to how Ark got the water penalty, they received the penalty of not being in water.

Which means Ark’s ability had increased whereas the enemies’ abilities had decreased!

‘Time to gain some EXP. This is good.’

Although they were considerably easy to defeat, they were still level 65. Because they were at least 5 levels higher than Ark, they gave a lot of experience. Every time he hunted a group of them his experience rose enough to be visible. The items they dropped were considerably better than what level 40 monsters dropped.

It was as if his body was flying, experience rose, and items were obtained!

They tried to enjoy the combat till they were sick of it.

Ark and his pets swept through the dungeon into no man's land. While beating up 4 Sharkmen suddenly a roaring sound came from behind.

Rooooar, Booom!

Sharkmen flinched and then hastily ran away.

'Sharkmen are running away? Just what is going on?'

He didn't have to wonder for long. After a deafening roar, the walls on each side started to leak water. A great deal of water came through and swallowed Ark and the Sharkmen.

It wasn't a question of whether to resist.

With only the spare time to say the word 'Ah', they were swept away by the torrent and they quickly passed by walls for some time.

When the water current seems to be weakening, the ground trembled.

Quickly raising his head Ark saw something amazing. He saw monsters and trash were being swept by the water current, just like himself.

‘Where is this? Ugh!’

- You took acid damage.
Damage 50.

There wasn’t a monster, but he took damage.

It was not just once. Before the message disappeared he received damage again. At his feet, a white steam came out. It was not only for Ark. Steam also came out of the stumbling monsters. There were monsters already in critical condition.

‘My gosh, this is... the stomach!’

Ark was startled and took a look around.

Thankfully the exit was just few meters away. The closing exit was wiggling, the sphincter of the stomach started to close since food just entered.

‘If we fail to escape, then we will be digested!’

“No, I don’t want to become whale poop!”

Bat held his head and screamed. Ark agreed.

To only become whale poop after working so hard to get here?

Ark headed towards the twitching and closing exit.

Bat went out first, then Ark threw Skull and himself. Ark was able to barely squeeze through, narrowly escaping the sphincter. Looking at the closed sphincter cold sweat appeared.

In just a few seconds, he had lost 350 Health.

‘What the hell, what kind of stupid dungeon is this...?’

At that moment a great sound came behind Ark’s back.

Slither!

Snap Snap Snap!

Ark turned his head to look, and his expression hardened.

Behind him, he saw that Crabs were also swept from the stomach. However the problem wasn’t with the Crabs. It was the big gray worm like monster that swallowed the Crabs. Crabs tried to attack with its pincers, but the worm didn’t even budge and ate them one by one.

“Wha-what is it this time? Cat’s Eyes!”

Using the skill, the worm’s information appeared.

Its name was Great Worm, a level 80 monster.

“Great Worm? So it is basically a large worm?”

To think he would have to fight not only revived food, but also worms...

As if responding to Ark’s voice, the worm turned its head. Opening its drooling mouth wide, it attacked. Ark spun his body and swung his sword. A dull sound rang out, but the worm didn’t even flinch and swung its tail.

“Ugh!”

With a single attack, his health went down by 200.

‘Dammit, I can’t win in my current condition!’

Even with darkness bonus, the monster was 15 levels higher. In addition, Ark already took damage from the stomach acid, and the circumstance didn’t allow him to flee.

Behind Ark, the sphincter blocked the way.

‘Dammit, I barely escaped from the stomach, so I can’t become a worm’s meal!’ Ark tightened his grip on the sword.

It was a desperate situation, but not completely hopeless.

The worm had lost 30% of its health while fighting Crabs.

“Lets go, Plan C. Bat, go distract it!”

“Understood!”

Bat flew fast to get the worm's attention. At the same time, Ark swung his sword on the red mark on worm's body.

Slash, slash, slash!

The worm shook greatly after being attacked with a chain of critical hits.

The worm had slow movement but it was unbelievably fast when attacking. The worm's sharp teeth grazed his side as it passed. Ark abandoned the idea of completely dodging worm's attacks.

As long as he concentrated on his body to conserve his health, his attacks would become weaker. The chance of scoring a critical hit would also decrease dramatically. It was better to be prepared for damage and concentrate on counterattacking.

The Worm didn't even budge at his sword attacks.

It was the special effect granted to big monsters with slow movement. But when it is kicked, it staggered a slightly. When the kick is successful, the monster affected by the stun or shove effect shows visual results.

'I can use this by following its attack pattern.'

Ark took a step and spun around the worm's girth.

After for the chance when the worm was in position to attack, he then sent a flying kick.

Taekwondo's kicks are reputed to the fastest among the martial arts. Even in

these, the flying kick's speed is outstanding!

Taking the flying kick, the worm flinched and stiffened. Ark used this chance to swing his sword land a critical hit.

After fighting the same way for at least 3 minutes, the worm dealt large damage.

- The familiar Nameless Skull has returned to the netherworld. You received 50% of the familiar's health as damage.

Although the familiars got stronger, it was a bit too much against the worm. The worm crushed the obstructive Skull by pressing down with its body.

Soon after, Bat was covered by the saliva spraying from the worm's mouth and was crushed when it fell to the floor. Because Ark was too busy concentrating on attacking he didn't have time to check on the familiars.

'Familiars can be resummoned after 24 hours. However if I die, it will be the end. I don't want to respawn in Nodeless and get swallowed up again by Gallic!'

Ark ground his teeth.

Even so his health that was already in the danger zone, fell to critical levels as he received the damage from his summons' deaths. But in this crisis there was a chance. He activated Undying Will and Indomitable Body.

"Now, Dark Blade!"

Slash!

Since familiars had disappeared, there was no reason to worry about his mana.

Ark immediately let fly 2 more Dark Blades.

However, the worms movements couldn't be hindered by sword attacks.

The same moment Dark Blade landed a hit, the worm's lashing tail hit his waist. With a dull impact, Ark was sent back flying.

Thanks to the effects of Undying and Indomitable a critical hit was avoided, but his health went down to 50. Without wasting a moment, worm went for a body slam.

'He's also nearly dead thanks to dark blade! I have 104 mana left. I can still use Dark Blade one more time. This will be decided in a single blow!'

"Snake, potion!"

The Snake wrapped around his waist spat out a potion.

It was one of Snake's advantages. In a normal fight, one needs to open the bag and take out a potion to drink it. Even a skilled player would take 3~4 minutes. They also needed to keep their bag organized. But thanks to Snake, it didn't take Ark even 1 second.

Taking a low level potion, he recovered 100 health.

Ark's eyes flashed. "I'll be damned if this doesn't kill it! Dark Blade!"

When Ark and the worm crossed each other, a deafening roar occurred.

Ark flew couple of meters and hit the wall.

He quickly checked his health and notice he only had 7 Health left. Worm, who got hit by multiple critical hits emitted a glow and melted away.

It was Ark's victory. The moment worm was defeated and his level rose and he a new skill was created.

You have learned a new skill.

Counter Attack (Beginner, Passive): It can only be learned by someone who is brave and can respond to an enemy's attack in a split second. But the most important thing is the courage to not fear the enemy. One who doesn't have an indomitable mind and body and can't overcome fear, cannot learn this skill.

When counter attack is successful, attack is increased by 50%. The 5% stun effect chance doesn't stack with other active attack skill.

Thanks to counterattacks memorized by his body after fighting underwater monsters, he received another useful special skill.

When the worm disappeared a grey skin was dropped.

Great Worm Skin (Ingredient)

The skin of the Great Worm, only available in special environment. Not only is it hard to encounter a Great Worm, but it is also extremely rare to find a skin of good quality.

If a great craftsman were to tan this skin, it can become a great leather.

He couldn't tell if it was a good or bad item from the description.

"Whew survived some how."

For now he survived.

But the price of survival was big.

His two familiars were resummoned back to the Netherworld, durability of his armor fell to critical state, and the shoes he wore instead of Sharkman's shackles were destroyed.

Although he can say he won, half of it was luck. He didn't think he could win if he fought it again at his current level.

"For now it would be good to avoid the worms."

Ark took out his tool box.

* * *

After tasting bitterness Ark became more cautious.

Unlike first time, he didn't dare sweep the dungeon blindly.

He explored cautiously one step at a time. Because Bat is gone, he couldn't scout. So he had no choice but to be careful.

Also whenever he hears something he felt suspicious he quickly used 'Stealth' to hide. Since other worm monsters didn't spawn, the hunting went on without much difficulty. If there weren't any worms, this place would have been ideal hunting ground because of the high experience. Ark who have explored dungeon realized several things.

In the dungeon, violent torrent occurs only once every 2 hours.

Ark calculated the time, and when it was time for the violent torrent, he wore Sharkman's Shackles. By wearing the Sharkman's shackles, it prevented him from being swept away even in a storm. Ark wasn't swept away by the torrent, but the penalties weren't a joke. So when the torrent passed he took it off.

It was really annoying, but the torrent wasn't all bad. When the torrent passed through there were trash everywhere. Once in a while, he would find a useful item among the trash. In many ways, it was a pretty good dungeon.

Ark got so obsessed in exploring the dungeon that he forgot to sleep. He passed 24 hours in this way.

"You've all worked hard. For now eat this." Ark made food to congratulate Bat and Skull's hard work.

When the health of the familiars was restored he said to Bat. "Bat, do you want to go against Dunphil again?"

“What? Really?” Bat asked in excitement.

Bat haven’t had a rematch after the two consecutive loses. Although they were busy with the quest, the real reason was that Ark believed Bat’s skill was still lacking. The only one who suffers if Bat gets sent back is Ark.

But this thinking had changed when he was alone for a moment.

Without the water penalty Bat became stronger. With Bat’s current condition, there was a good chance of winning. No, Bat currently had high morale because of the sudden increase of strength. Therefore this was the most optimal chance.

‘If by chance Bat losses, as long as I avoid Great Worms, Skull and myself is enough.’

“Just don’t forget all the training we’ve done. Be cool headed and composed. Pay attention when I say something. You can’t do anything about losing because you’re lacking skills, but if you don’t fight to the best of your abilities, then I won’t give you anymore chances.”

“I understand master. I will do my best.”

Ark received the promise and summoned Dunphil.

Dunphil, as always, talked in an annoyingly arrogant tone.

“What is it now? Did you not give up?”

“It will be different this time.”

“Hmph, even so Bat is still just a bat. In addition he is a Bat not of the Vampire lineage, so he can’t beat me who is a noble of the Netherworld.”

Bat didn’t rush in even when Dunphil provoked him. Bat simple looked sharply at him.

Ark nodded in satisfaction and said.

“Okay, Bat. Go ahead.”

“Prepare yourself!” Bat gave a battle cry and flew.

Dunphil swung his fingernail as if ridiculing Bat. The situation was different from their past battles. Bat circled around Dunphil’s arm like a snake climbing a tree and struck a blow to the neck.

“Ack! How-how can this be!” Sound of confusion came out of his mouth.

Because Dunphil saw Bat being slow underwater, he was stupefied when Bat became hundreds of times faster.

Seeing the enemy’s confused appearance, Bat’s fighting spirit greatly increased. While swooping down from above and rising up from below, he hammered Dunphil’s chin.

The chain of attacks technique he had learned from Ark!

This time, Bat showed a completely different appearance. It was enough to not prompt for Ark’s coaching.

When the attacks connected, Dunphil’s body stumbled.

“You bastard! Even after all that harassment!”

“Thi-this bastard....!”

When his health fell to about 40% Dunphil’s body was surrounded by smoke. A big bat came out of the dissipating smoke and struck Bat.

‘Transform!’

Dunphil judged it will be hard to keep up with Bat in terms of speed and so he transformed himself into a bat.

When Dunphil transformed, it became a dog fight.

As the two bats got complexly tangled, they fought intensely. Being attacked and taking hits, the battle was so fast, Ark couldn’t tell who is who without Cat’s Eyes.

As the fight continued, it seemed like Bat is being pushed back. They had similar abilities but Dunphil’s transformation seems to have bewildered Bat. In addition, Bat didn’t have much experience fighting airborne monsters.

“Bat there is no need to be confused. Think of underwater combat. If you can dodge Jellyfish’s tentacles, why wouldn’t you be able to dodge Dunphil’s attacks.”

Ark’s advice had an effect.

Bat hadn’t fought with airborne monsters before. But marine monsters were able to move around naturally in water. In other words, they were no different from airborne monsters. In addition, while fighting marine monsters, there

was a water penalty in effect.

No matter how strong Dunphil is, it was no more difficult than fighting marine monsters with the water penalty applied.

Bat's attack pattern changed.

Just like when he was swimming underwater, he spread his wing wide and waited until he spotted an opening, then he would swoop down like a hawk. Control of attack speed. This was the fruit of Ark's beating.

“Cheater, to interfere in another’s fight!”

“Hmph, you said it won’t be a challenge no matter what. Did you change your mind?”

Bat shouted back and the fight went back to its original situation.

Dunphil's and Bat's health constantly remained the same. But since Dunphil had significantly more health, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Bat is overwhelming in terms of skill.

Continuing on for 5 more minutes, there was a slight difference. Dunphil fell to critical and his body was dyed in red.

Suddenly Dunphil let out a scream and pulled himself back. Dunphil let out a black air current, stealing Bat's field of vision and charged. He was trying to put up a last stand.

Ark's eyes flashed.

“Bat. Don’t dodge, this is the zero situation!”

“Uohhh, die! You impudent bastard!”

Dunphil charged forward as if he’d been shot from a bow.

If it could be called a charge, Bat also exhaustly approached.

“This will decide it!”

Bat ground his teeth and charged. When the two bats seemed like they were going to crash, Bat suddenly did a sharp curve. Dunphil who have charged at full strength had his eyes in full circle.

“Wha-what...?”

Bang!

Dunphil crashed into the wall. In addition, Bat spun around and hit Dunphil on back of his head.

Finally, Dunphil, who had his health depleted, fell to the ground fluttering like paper.

“Good for you, Bat!”

Ark sported a satisfied smile. This was Ark’s final arranged match. Zero situation; this was Ark’s code, to move the opposite direction.

“Ugh, to think I really lost....”

Dunphil crawled on the ground and let out a moan. Then smiled to the approaching bat.

“Huhu, you became stronger. Actually, I remembered you from the beginning. But I wanted for you to be stronger, so I was deliberately cold...”

Bam, bam, bam!

It seemed like Dunphil had been waiting for this one scene from a youth drama.

But Bat didn't carry the slightest sense of this sentiment. Bat, who had approached with long strides, abruptly stomped on Dunphil's snout.

In the end, Dunphil couldn't say anything else and disappeared.

At that moment a message window popped up.

Player's familiar Hatred-bearing Bat has defeated Dunphil.

You can now fuse the summon to evolve it. Please choose one familiar to be the main.

The familiar created by the fusion evolution will have the main summon's stats with the auxiliary familiar's stats after consideration.

Even if Bat won, Dunphil was at a higher level and had higher stats than Bat. But Ark didn't hesitate to choose Bat. Stats aren't everything. Although it

was not indicated with a number, the experience gained with Ark through practice and battle was worth more than ability.

Also he didn't want to give up Hatred-bearing Bat and hang around with someone like Dunphil.

“Main, Hatred-Bearing Bat. Auxiliary Dunphil.”

As soon as Ark's decision was made Bat's body was enveloped by light. His body also slowly changed into a human silhouette.

With a black mantle and slicked back hair was a 10 year old boy.

It was similar to boy going to a halloween party dressed as Dracula.

All in all, one got the sense of cuteness however the sharply raised eyebrows made his expression fierce.

The familiar's fusion evolution has ended.

After fusing with Dunphil, Bat has become a low-ranking Vampire noble. For being in control during great troubles he has gained the name Dedric. This is how Dedric obtained his noble status.

Lancel's sword is now Dedric's artifact.

By using Lancel's sword, a 10% collaboration attack bonus will be added. By owning the artifact an additional skill was created.

Dedric

A Vampire with a lightning fast ascension to a Low-rank Vampire; resident of Youge. Has lots of pride for his success and hates the indignity of being recalled. An effect of turning into a Vampire, if it is not in a dungeon he cannot turn into a vampire during the daylight. His bat form receives 30% reduction in stats when out in the sun.

Race	Vampire	Alignment	Dark
Ranking	Lower Class Noble	Health	250 (+200)
Loyalty	43 (-25)	Strength	25 (+15)
Agility	40 (+15)	Stamina	35 (+15)
Wisdom	15 (+15)	Intelligence	55 (+15)
Luck		15 (+15)	

* Can turn into Human or Bat naturally. * Dark Dash can be used. Lets out darkness, temporarily turning enemies into dark status, then uses low-class charges to inflict damage. Mana cost: 30

‘Oh, isn’t this pretty useful?’

Every stat had dramatically risen.

General stats can be calculated to be around level 27. At Nodelesse after it had been stuffed with food, his stats had been around level 18, but in an instant the level had risen by about 9 levels. And he had also learned a new skill. It seemed to be the ultimate skill Dunphil had used.

Because the Vampire affinity appeared there was a penalty, but overall it was satisfactory. But there was one thing that was on his mind.

All stats had risen, but for some reason loyalty had a -25 penalty. That effect was quickly seen.

“Bat, good job.”

“Bat? Who is that?”

“What?”

“Huu, listen well. I am no longer the Bat you know. I am the noble of the Netherworld, Dedric. So far I have been hit and tortured with food, but I will no longer bear with it.

Ark’s expression turned outrageously twisted.

Listening to him, it didn't seem as if he had forgotten about the time he was Bat. In other words, just because he became a bit stronger, he was defying his master.

Ark was furious. He worked hard to feed his familiars and even trained them. Is that all? He had chosen Bat instead of Dunphil who had better abilities. But the first thing he did was mutiny.

Ark's voice became cold. "So?"

"Of course I am not defying everything. Whether my position went up or not, you are still my master and it doesn't change. But I will deny being a food test subject. Of course I want to grow, so I will eat, but I will chose to do so after seeing the effect. This is my obvious right."

"Right?" Ark brightly smiled.

It seems he is able to use difficult words because he has increased intelligence. What should he do. It was very regrettable.

Why couldn't this guy understand what kind of person his owner is, after he became smarter than when he was a Bat? In other words, Ark was someone who doesn't go easy once they've wronged him.

'It seems there is a need to show to now show this pet its subservient position.'

Ark stood up and walked to Dedric. Without any warning, Ark started to kick Dedric.

Even if he did evolve, he was only about level 27. Taking Ark's kicks, his health dropped steadily.

Dedric who rolled on the floor screamed in fright.

"Lets-lets talk! This is violence!"

"Didn't you know? I like violence."

"I-I'm a child! This is child abuse!"

"But when doing something that deserves a beating, you get hit. Its said that kids without a conscience are a problem of society."

Ark kept stepping on him, and eventually Dedric's health hit rock bottom and was sent back.

Skull's and Snake's eyes became full circles by Ark's sudden change in appearance.

Ark spoke while having soft smile.

"Don't worry, you haven't done anything wrong. But ones who defy me just because they grew slightly will be beaten. Of course you guys are kind, this will never happen with you guys, right?"

Although he talked with smile, there was a cold atmosphere.

Skull and Snake immediately nodded.

Ark immersed himself with hunting with skull like nothing happened. For

witnessing Dedric's misery, Skull worked even harder in fights.

If it felt Ark was in danger, he didn't hesitate to become Ark's shield.

He wanted to show Ark he was different from Dedric.

Seeing this, Ark gave Skull delicious food and was affectionate. But it was different for Dedric. Ark stepped on Dedric without saying anything after 24 hours have passed.

"Hiik, st-stop, I was wrong, I won't do it again!"

"Once a traitor, always a traitor."

After repeating this 3~4 times, Dedric got on to its hands and knees immediately to beg after being summoned.

"Hiik, ma-master, I'm sorry! I was a bit crazy and I just joked a bit!"

But Ark didn't even pretend to listen and stepped on him without mercy.

If you cut some slack to ones who've overstepped their bounds, they will always try to surpass you. Kids without manners these days, are mostly due to their parents being indecisive.

Just as pets might try to bite their master if not trained at an early age, when teaching manners you must make sure the seeds are sown deeply.

Ark was planning on stepping on him, until they got out of the dungeon at the very least.

The Caretaker's Spirit

"Snake, pack them up."

When Ark pointed to the items gathered at his feet, Snake extended its tongue and swallowed it all. The trash piles that were swept in with the torrent were fairly profitable. Various kinds of seaweed, Merpeople items, recovery potions, Pearls and other random drops. Thanks to that, the bag he had completely emptied in Nodelesse had become quite hefty.

An exceptional amount of monsters had been guarding the pile of junk, but now, even if 5 or 6 of the dungeon's monsters rushed him, he could easily defeat them.

The advantage of a Dark Walker's Dark attribute was the stat increases, which allowed him to pose to be a higher level than he actually was, and thanks to it, he could gain additional EXP from defeating monsters at least 5 levels higher than himself with the same amount of effort. The applied additional EXP was 10% per 5 levels. The monsters he encountered in Gallic's stomach were on average, 10 levels higher.

The additional EXP was a whopping 20%! To maximize the effect, Ark only slept for 2 hours a day and worked hard to level up. Thanks to this, Ark's level increased by another 10 in a week.

"Status window."

Character Name	Ark	Race	Human
Alignment	Good +50		

Fame	520	Level	62
Profession	Dark Walker		
Title	Cat Knight, Caretaker		
Health	1,305	Mana	730 (+100)
Spiritual Power	100	Strength	176
Agility	196 (+17)	Stamina	246
Wisdom	25	Intelligence	141
Luck	41	Flexibility	14
Art of Communication	18	Affection	18
Special Stat: Knowledge of Ancient Relics			35

Equipment Effects

Black Bear Mouse Leather Armor: Agility 2, Frost Resistance +20
Cat Paws: Attack Speed +10%, Agility +15, Critical Hit Rate +10%
Crystal Golem's Head: Mana +100

*All abilities will increase by 20% in the dark.

* You have the ability to hide in the darkness (Duration time 10 minutes. Cancelled if you get into combat).

* Resistance Fear, Darkness, Blind, and Charm spells is increased by 50%.

*You can bring out the true abilities from all types of tools.

Thanks to steadily raising his Stamina, his Health was now over 1,300. With the 100 additional Mana from the Crystal Golem's Head, his Mana was 830! It was enough to use Dark Blade 8 times consecutively if he didn't use his Familiars.

Since his level passed 60, his hunting efficiency decreased because he was no longer able to receive 10% additional EXP.

"I didn't notice when the bonus was there, but when it disappeared, it doesn't seem like the experience is increasing. Well, since my level rose enough and the bag is almost full, it should be about time to start finishing the quest."

He still hadn't found a clue about the quest.

The White Whale's stomach was far more complicated than he expected. The long passageway was straight for the most part, but if he strayed a little it soon became a maze-like terrain. The phlegmy cell-like walls twisted and tangled, and there were places looking exactly alike no matter where he went. Some areas activated traps such as acid one from the stomach.

At first, everything was interesting, but after a week had passed, the dungeon covered in dark red flesh began to be stifling and suffocating.

'Anyway, I need to find the place where I can end the quest.'

Ark walked forward.

Ark could approximately guess where the place related to the quest was located.

He had thoroughly combed through the lair for a week, but the sole place Ark hadn't gone to was the lair of the Great Worms.

Ark had avoided fights with the worms to the best of his ability so far. But now, Ark was also level 62. With the additional bonus of the darkness attribute, he was at a level where he can somehow fight them.

Ark passed through the narrow passageway and came to a wide area. In a plaza-like space covered in red membrane, scores of worms were squirming.

Ark took out his pot, boiled soup, and drank it.

Spicy Flavor Seafood Soup

Health +100, Attack and Defense increased by 20% for 30 minutes.

The Seafood Soup, which could only be made once Survival Cooking reached Intermediate, had the best effects out of all the food Ark learned. In addition, it didn't have the aftereffects that normally goes hand-in-hand with good effects. But it required relatively rare seaweed and shellfish, so he couldn't eat it often.

Energy rose after drinking the soup. After also feeding Skull, he lured the worms one by one.

Even though he'd raised his level and was even enjoying the effects of the soup, the worm felt as strong as ever.

If Dedric would turn into a bat and draw its attention, it'd be much easier. After fighting difficult enemies without him, Ark came to know how much of big a help Dedric had been. But no matter how regrettable it was, he had no desire to use a Familiar who wouldn't listen. Dedric still needed to have his behavior corrected.

'Although its stats grew a lot while Dedric is being locked up...'

Skull had now grown to level 20, but its usefulness was still much lower compared to Dedric. Its movements were slower than Dedric, and it often ran about in confusion when the battle started because it wasn't smart. Moreover, its stats also rose in the wrong places, such as Wisdom or Luck, so its Stamina was low. If the opponent was the worm, it'd be hard for Skull to withstand one or two hits.

However, Skull had endless loyalty.

When Ark was in the worst-case scenario, Skull died for him without hesitation. Users actually don't feel pain when taking a hit. However, it was set so NPCs or monsters felt pain equal to reality and possessed fear of death.

It was the same reason why Dedric was getting beaten up by Ark and suffering. But no matter how well trained the pet or Familiar was, there were almost no cases where they would die in their master's place.

It was only possible because Skull was dull and had strong loyalty.

'Skull is my additional health.'

Skull's real role was to die for Ark in the worst situation.

Skull also understood its role. If Ark's Health fell below 10%, Skull went in front of him without any orders. Then, with his stats raised significantly by the Indomitable and Undying, Ark let loose a Counter Attack or Dark Blade at the worm and killed it.

Skull also barely endured one or two hits.

If the critical hit or Dark Blade missed by some chance, then Skull would be inevitably force recalled. However, thanks to the experience Ark had gained underwater, the precision of his techniques had risen enormously and skill failure was very low.

The first time is always difficult.

'The worm has strong attack power, but its attack method is a repetition of a

simple pattern.'

After killing a few worms, he got the hang of it. He just barely won against the first two, but as he kept fighting, he had more Health left. Later, he was able to win with at least 30% Health left.

'If the worm was not a large monster, I could probably defeat two of them at once.'

A large monster had the ability to cancel many kinds of additional effects with a high probability. If not for it , it would be possible to fight several of them with consecutive kicks and sword strikes, similar to what he did with the Crabs or Sharkmen.

Using the same method, all the worms were defeated in a span of half a day of hunting.

"You did well."

As Ark patted his head, Skull rolled around to show its happiness. Skull became a more praiseworthy rascal in Ark's eyes.

Even though he'd almost died a few times, if Ark patted it on the head once, it'd be completely okay. As Ark gazed proudly at Skull, Snake glared at Skull with a nasty look. It was something he'd found out just recently, but since Snake thought of Ark as its parent, it was especially prone to jealousy. If Ark favored another Familiar for even a moment, it would soon grow sulky, wrap itself around Ark, and behave annoyingly.

Well, though he'd gotten used to it now so it didn't bother him as much...

In any case, after clearing the worms Ark began to really explore. Once he went to the opposite side, the entire space reverberated, going *boom*, *boom*.

"It's the sound of a heartbeat. Is Gallic's heart on the other side?"

Just then, Snake suddenly teared up and spat something out with a cough.

It was the Compass of the Sea Emperor.

The compass vibrated as it emitted light to match the sound of the heartbeat. Because of it, it seemed like Snake couldn't endure it and spat it out.

"This is definitely the place where the quest will be solved. But where exactly do I need to go?"

No matter which direction he looked they were all blocked. Then all of a sudden, the passage from the crystal pillar came to mind.

If you want to see me then close both of your eyes.

'If there's some kind of trick here, then it's definitely the hint.'

Ark stood still and closed his eyes.

As he did so, the sound ringing through the whole space gradually died down. Then at some point, the sound focused in one direction. As if the hand mirror was being led by the beating sound, it vibrated to one side.

'Is it this way? But it's blocked...'

Ark placed his hand on the wall and moved. Then the wall shrank away as if it was surprised and a path appeared.

It was also the same afterwards. As he moved along the path, he closed his eyes and stretched his hand towards the direction of the sound whenever he reached a dead-end. Then a path appeared on its own. After walking for a few minutes or so, a place flashing with scarlet light came to view.

In the center stood a stone statue in human form. It held an oval stone fragment in its hand. The stone fragment looked like it had been split somewhere, it had an aura so black that he could visually confirm it was being emitted.

"Found it. This is definitely the item she held and disappeared!"

When Ark quickly reached out towards the stone fragment—

The stone statue's eyes flashed as it raised its head and let out a piercing scream.

"KYAAAAAA!"

"Eh, wh-what?"

Spiderweb-like cracks spread on the stone statue. Then, as if it were erupting, it scattered all around and the sight of a jet-black figure emerged. As a whole, it looked similar to the Reaper he'd fought in the Shadow Forest.

It had an enormous body big enough to completely fill the space. A demon

with its eyes covered by a black cloth and draped in a black mantle. Behind it, black hair writhed all around like living snakes. Completely black, even the skin was as cracked as an old tree was black.

- Boss monster Adelaine has appeared!

Quest has been updated.

The Guardian Deity of the Merpeople, Gallic → Encroaching Darkness

At the end of your exploration of White Whale; Gallic's stomach, you have finally arrived at the destination. The source of the strength that filled Gallic's stomach with darkness and revived monsters as undead was at its heart.

It's certain the darkness caused Gallic to lose his mind. You must defeat the evil being Adelaine, born from the root of darkness, and return Gallic to normal.

Difficulty: +E

The quest was updated with the warning message.

The difficulty was a whopping +E!

'To think there'd be a boss monster even inside a whale's stomach!'

Suddenly, the drooping hair spread out like tentacles and closed in to attack Ark.

Ark quickly moved his feet to avoid a tentacle. He blocked it as if it were a Jellyfish's tentacle.

An electrifying fear scintillated through him. Even though he'd blocked it, his Health went down by 200.

"Eyes of the Cat!"

Adelaine's health and level came up.

It was a monstrous 100 level boss monster.

Warning bells of an impending crisis flashed across inside Ark's head.

"No way, I can't win with my current level even if I were to die and revive again!"

If you don't want to die, you have to accurately estimate the gap between you and your opponent's strength in an exchange of blows.

Once the fight with the enemy started, it wouldn't be easy to escape. Since one would have to take damage from two or three backstabs while running away with back turned. If one felt he had to run, the secret to surviving was to escape with a little extra Health left.

There was the definite level difference, but more importantly, if he suffered a chain attack from many tentacles, he'd only be able to endure for a few

seconds.

Ark shouted as he spun around, "Skull, stop him!"

Pow-pow-pow!

Skull courageously leapt forward, but it was immediately recalled when it was struck by 3 tentacles. Ark had lost 200 Health because of this attack, but it also bought him a few seconds.

"Sorry, Skull. There was no other way."

Ark held back the tears and madly ran to the exit.

Now there was no choice.

First he needed to get out of the exit and bide this time...

It would take a long time, but he could raise his level to 80 by hunting worms exclusively within the White Whale's Labyrinth. With the darkness effect bonus, he might be able to fight Adelaine somehow.

Ark dodged the lashing tentacles and opened the exit by extending his hand.

But while he was running madly, the whole dungeon suddenly shook as a howl rang out from behind him. For looking behind, Ark's face paled.

Adelaine screeched as it swung its tentacles towards the wall.

Every time it did so, the flesh of the wall fell in clumps.

The shaking of the labyrinth was due to Gallic being unable to endure the pain and ran amok. But there wasn't enough time to feel sorry for Gallic's pain.

Destroying the walls with monstrous strength, Adelaine was closing in on Ark. Adelaine was truly the manifestation of horror itself.

'Holy shit, it's moving really fast...!'

Every time the tentacles whooshed in with the sound of the wind and grazed the back of his head, Ark's hair stood on its end.

'Dammit, I thought it wouldn't follow me if I got out of the heart!"

He was mistaken. Adelaine intended to follow him to no end.

Ark estimated that even if Adelaine followed him, its gigantic body would be slowed down by the walls.

If he took that chance to completely break away from its view and put a some hundred meters between them, the in-combat state would be cancelled. Then he intended to hide with 'Stealth'. But rather than breaking free, Adelaine was actually closing the distance while destroying the walls and chasing him.

It was as if a message of despair was popping up before his eyes.

'Dammit, am I going to die like this?'

Stat loss! In addition, he had to explore the dungeon from the beginning. But

that wasn't all! Dying against a boss monster increased the probability of dropping equipment items. And monsters also picked up items if they saw them.

What if he dropped Lancel's Sword and Adelaine picked it up? The result would be him having to use a crappy sword until he defeats Adelaine.

'No way! Even if I die, I'm going to run until the very end! Let's see how far you'll follow!'

Ark ran through the heaving Gallic's stomach without rest.

Just then, something flashed across his mind as he passed a fork in the path.

'Wait, this way has always been... of course! Maybe with this method...?'

Ark, who had combed through the labyrinth's terrain, realized a hidden method to turn the tide.

'Would something like that be possible? No, whether it's possible or not isn't important. The only thing I can do right now is to bet everything on this method!'

Ark stopped abruptly and twisted his body.

Adelaine quickly swung its tentacle.

Ark dodged the tentacle and ran towards Adelaine. Then, when he was up in front of its nose, he rolled on the ground. As the tentacle grazed his side, he received enormous damage. However, Ark didn't fight back.

Ark sprang up and passed Adelaine, then ran in the opposite direction. Then he leapt into the fork he'd passed earlier. It was a plaza filled with ankle-deep water.

Ark stepped over the piles of trash strewn around as he moved to the center of the plaza, then turned around. Adelaine was pounding into the plaza.

Ark grinned as he muttered, "Now, let's see if I die or you die."

"KYAAAAK!"

Adelaine ran in shrieking, but stopped. When its feet touched the surface, acrid smoke rose with a hiss. Too late, Adelaine realized it was in some kind of danger and tried to back away. But Ark wasn't going to let it escape for he had lured it in with such difficulty.

"Getting in is easy but it's not so easy to get out. Snake, Shield!"

As if Snake had been waiting, it spat out a tattered shield.

It was the crappy Shell Shield he'd found in a trash pile. But right now, this shield was his only lifeline.

Ark took the shield and positioned it above his head like an umbrella, then swung at the wall with his sword. The space rocked wildly, closing the entrance and exit. Adelaine screeched in confusion as it flailed its tentacles, but it just blocked the entrance more solidly each time it did.

Simultaneously, a shower rained down from above their heads.

KWAAAA!

- Shield's durability has dropped by 10!

- You took acid poison damage.
Damage 50!

When the shower came down, it pierced holes on the shield. Even if a small droplet dripped onto him, his Health dropped steadily.

It was an obvious result. The liquid raining down like a shower was stomach acid!

The place Ark had entered was no other than Gallic's stomach.

Once Ark stimulated the stomach, the surprised sphincter blocked the entrance and exit, pouring down acid.

'I'll be in for it if it doesn't die. Either we die together, or you die alone!'

Adelaine was directly covered in the acid shower.

Its swaying mantle was covered with holes, and tentacles were also breaking off strand by strand. Adelaine thrashed about madly, once its Health has decreased to about 50%, it approached Ark. However, with each step it took,

a malodorous smelling steam rose as Adelaine's Health dropped.

It certainly wasn't a relaxing situation for Ark.

"Restoration magic! Restoration magic! Restoration magic!"

Ark repaired the shield without rest as he drank recovery potions. Even so, his Health dropped steadily.

'From now on I'll fight patiently!'

By the time Adelaine crossed the stomach and reached Ark, it already had less than 10% of its Health left.

Adelaine shrieked in rage as it raised its tattered arm.

Ark used his trump card.

"Summon Familiar, Dedric!"

"Ack! Ma-master?"

Dedric let out a confused screech as he was summoned.

"Ma-master, please forgive..."

"Shut up and do everything you can to block that guy. If you do a good job then I'll forgive you!"

"Huh? Really?"

Without even knowing what was going on, Dedric replied with an emotional face. Then he immediately turned into a Bat and rammed himself into Adelaine's face.

But Dedric was forcefully recalled after just a few seconds of being baptized in acid.

"Arghh, it's hot... Master... you... promised."

It was a brave end.

Deric's sacrifice had an effect. When Dedric rushed in Adelaine's hand slipped to the side. Although Ark lost some health he was able to avoid a direct hit.

Ark flipped the shield over his back like a turtle and jumped up.

"Dark Blade!"

The magic sword released a Dark Blade.

With a violent noise, he landed a critical hit. At the same time, a golden opportunity appeared. In tatters from the acid, Adelaine stumbled as it fell to one knee and allowed a Double Critical Chance. Without delay, Ark cast Dark Blade.

- With Double Critical Chance, you have landed critical hit 2x.

- You have
levelled up.

As Adelaine's throat gaped open, a black light burst out. Since he defeated a level 100 boss monster, Ark instantly levelled up to level 64.

Streams of black light poured out for a while, then Adelaine's body began to shrink ceaselessly. Then finally, it shrank to a size similar to Ark. A hazy grey light gathered in the form of a female Mermaid. The female Mermaid stretched out a trembling arm as it whispered in a weak voice.

-
...Christin
...

Slowly, the acid rain stopped.

* * *

Ark stared at the female Mermaid with a stupefied face. He had toppled the boss monster, but the item which was supposed to drop didn't and something else had appeared instead.

Just in case, Ark widened the distance and scrutinized the female Mermaid.

- Christin, Christin, it's
you, right?

The female Mermaid's hands fumbled around her as if she was blind while she was weeping.

- Why? Why don't you call my name? Why don't you hold my hand? Have you forgotten me? Is that it? I waited for you. I've waited for you as I cried until my eyes could no longer see. Christin... please...

The female Mermaid bowed her head as she sobbed.

- You've become angry with me, haven't you? Right? You've become angry because I tricked you, right? I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I... knew you would return. I thought you would return if I did that. You can't forgive me after all? Is that it?

Suddenly, the hand mirror on his chest buzzed as it vibrated. Once he took it out, light poured out, reflecting the inflamed red stomach lining, and started to show a cutscene.

There was the man he'd seen in the pillar. There was also a Mermaid.

The man was agonized because the world was being encroached by darkness.

The power of darkness was enveloping the world had not yet reached Nodelesse. The land was covered in the flames of war, but Nodellese was as peaceful as it had always been.

Because of this, he was even more agonized. He was ashamed he was looking away from the world's suffering. And he knew that one day, even

beautiful Nodelesse would be stained in darkness.

In the end, the man stood.

He had decided to devote his life to stopping the great evil that was covering the world. The man explained his feelings to the one he loved for a long time.

His lover understood him, it was all she could do. Because they were the words of the one she loved.

But she didn't accept it.

The lover stayed up on the last night, stole one of the man's treasures, and hid it. She believed if she hid it, the man would eventually give up and return again.

But the man did not return. Even though 10 years passed as time flowed on and the force of darkness was eliminated, the man still did not return.

The woman finally regretted it.

The despair of having to wait for the lover who did not return changed her. Her hair fell and her skin cracked like an old tree.

The never-ending tears even robbed her of her sight. And finally, her end came to her too. Knowing her nearing end, she entrusted her body to Gallic, her soul-companion.

So even if she died, the man's treasure would be protected...

It was the only thing she could do as atonement.

After imprisoning herself, she spent a long time regretting and regretting some more, and atoning, atoning.

Ark felt her emotions far too strongly.

The hand mirror even conveyed her emotions. But it wasn't the only reason.

Why wouldn't he understand the longing, loneliness, and pain for a lost one? Ark had experienced the same thing, after all.

5 years ago when his father passed away, he felt the same indescribable pain.

Even more if it had happened because of his mistake...

The wounded soul trembled as it wept.

- I'm sorry. I'm
sorry.

Ark lowered his shield and walked toward her.

What could he do? What could he do for her?

His heart was filled with sympathy. She was a girl who was turned into an evil spirit while waiting for her lover. Once the evil spirit's mask was taken off, there was simply a miserable lover looking for forgiveness.

Having received her emotions, Ark cried as he grasped her hand.

"Adelaine... you've done nothing wrong. That's how love is. It can only be beautiful because it is so very selfish. That is love, and it is the same kind of love I shared with you. No one will be able to blame you and neither will I. I will not forgive you because I've never hated you..."

-
Christin.
..

Adelaine's eyes trembled.

It was then.

Suddenly, her grey form was enveloped in white light, and she slowly changed into a younger body.

It was the appearance of the beautiful Mermaid he had seen in the hand mirror and pillar.

She gazed at Ark with a bewitching smile, then approached like the spring breeze and lightly kissed him.

'Does Adelaine know I'm not her lover?'

As he received the kiss he instinctively thought as such.

But she just revealed an ambiguous smile as she slowly disappeared.

Miracle Nursing has succeeded.

Through sorrow that arose from sincerity, you aided a fallen soul. People with bodily pains are not the only patients. Patients who truly need someone's hand are people who know an illness of the heart. An illness of the heart is a terrifying sickness that corrupts the soul.

An illness of the body can be treated with medicine, but an illness of the heart can only be treated by a person who understands.

Sometimes, just one word of comfort can demonstrate a miraculous strength no magic can replicate. With your sincere words of comfort, Adelaine's heart has now found peace, and she can be with the person she loves.

*For succeeding in Miracle Nursing, all your stats has increased by 1.

*Affection has increased by 10.

*Fame has increased by 50.

*Your alignment to Good has increased by 50.

Since you've succeeded in Miracle Nursing, your title has been elevated to 'Soul Caretaker.'

Your fame as a caretaker has increased and you will come to receive the praises of many of the sick.

*As a title-related bonus, all stats increase by 1 each.

*Fame increases by 50

A stone fragment and necklace fell at the spot where Adelaine had disappeared.

Mysterious Stone Fragment Infused with Ancient Power

It is a mysterious stone that emits a dark energy from its surface.

You can check it once Knowledge of Ancient Artifacts becomes level 50. Until it is checked, the owner will suffer a -50% penalty to all stats.

Adelaine's Necklace (Rare)

Item type: Necklace

Restriction: Level 70

A necklace used by Adelaine, it is a simple pearl necklace. However, it responded to the Adelaine's affection as she prayed for her loved one's safety and came to possess a magical power.

Effect: Defense increased by 30, Affection increased by 5.

Special Effect: Once a day, you can use the ocean's blessing to raise defense by 40%.

'It's a R-rare item! And an accessory!'

Users who hadn't been able to put on a single ring even at level 100 were among the majority. Accessories were extremely precious, moreover, if it was Rare then it was an item hard to find even in an auction.

He had been very expectant since he'd defeated a level 100 boss monster in a hidden dungeon, but this was truly above his expectations.

The penalty imposed on the owner of the Stone Fragment wasn't a problem. Once he put it in Snake's belly, it didn't affect Ark.

As Ark drooled while grabbing the items, a humming voice rang in the space.

- Thank you.
Adventurer.

"Huh? Wh-who?"

- I am the owner of the body you
are inside of.

"Body? Then, perhaps White Whale Gallic?"

- That is my
name.

"Haven't you gone insane?"

- I was insane. However, when you purified Adelaine, I came to my senses. Adelaine is my long-time companion. She spent hundreds of years inside me as she waited for someone who would not return. Her body died long ago, but her mind remained and waited for him. However, that was the problem.

Gallic let out a big sigh and said in a bitter voice.

- Dark energy lies in the object she stole. It does not exert very much influence on a living being, but it is fatal to a soul. In addition, she was wrought with guilt over having betrayed him. Her guilt was as strong as her love. Because of it, she was consumed by the dark force the stone emanated. And I, who shared a spiritual bond with her, was also assimilated into that darkness, thus I lost my senses.

"Someone who would not return? What do you mean?"

- Actually, he died before Adelaine came into me.

"What? Then why didn't you tell her?"

- She also knew. Even though I did not like knowing, she came to know it. However, she did not acknowledge it. She drew her last breath, and her soul believed he would return. That is love.

Although he was just a whale he was talking about all sort of things.

In any case, after listening to his words, Ark felt even more sorry for

Adelaine. As Ark lowered his head with a melancholic expression, the white whale spoke in a loud voice.

- Raise your head with pride. Adventurer! Straighten your shoulders! You have freed a lover from the pain she suffered for hundreds of years. Where could you find a more praiseworthy deed for a man?!

RUUUUUMBLE!

The space suddenly shook and an enormous amount of sea water rushed into the stomach. Unable to prepare the Sharkman's Shackles, Ark was swept by the torrent in the space of a single breath and sucked into somewhere. In the next moment, he was launched up by an incredible force.

At the same time it became bright before his eyes, and he could see the blue sky.

"Blechh, bleech!"

From his mouth came the sound of Ark trying to draw breath in vain.

Ark surged into the sky riding the plume of water that was bursting from Gallic's blowhole. He saw the blue sky illuminated with sunshine and the ocean stretching endlessly underneath him all at once.

He saw the White Whale's back as it surged above the sea like a mountain range. It was a magical and beautiful spectacle.

* * *

"So that's what happened."

The Mermaid Queen nodded.

Ark returned to Nodelesse with the White Whale. When he conveyed the tangled truth about Adelaine, the Mermaids received a considerable shock.

Since everything they had believed as the truth originated from misconceptions, it wasn't easy for them to acknowledge it.

However, they couldn't help but believe the words of Gallic, who had witnessed the very truth himself.

"Your courage and love, which just looked foolhardy, have brought about a good result in the end. All Merpeople should feel ashamed for misunderstanding and hating the Meow all this time from a hasty judgement."

'Eh? Meow? What is this absurdity?'

Until now, he had never once heard of the Meow from the Merpeople. But why did this term suddenly pop up after everything had been settled?

As Ark made a confused expression, the Queen asked as if she was surprised, "Didn't you know?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Christin was the hero of the Meow. They also call him Hero Maban."

"Hero Maban?" Ark was shocked.

Dark Walker was Hero Maban's initial profession. Because of this, ever since his job-change, Ark had been examining tons of data to try and find information about Hero Maban.

All of New World's professions had a related hero. If you found information about that hero, there were many cases where you earned a linked quest. It was an essential quest that granted items, skills, or stats matching the profession.

But Ark hadn't been able to find any information yet and had half given up. But to think the hand mirror quest was a quest related to the Hero Maban!

'That's right, why didn't I think of that? Debra desired the power of Hero Maban. Then the item he dropped could be hiding a secret to earning Hero Maban's strength. And Merpeople are also related to beasts in the end.'

At last all the clues came together in his mind, though it was meaningless since everything was already over...

"Now he is called Hero Maban, but back then he was just a Meow boy. Because of that, many Merpeople opposed the former Mermaid Queen's love. Before then, the Meow and the Merpeople did not have a good relationship."

'No wonder. At the heart of it, it was the relationship between a cat and a fish?'

"And then he eventually left Nodelesse, and the former Queen hid herself while longing for him. Gallic also went crazy as a result, and in the end the

Merpeople who hated Chrstin from the beginning pinned all the blame on him and became sworn enemies of the Meow. All of the Beasts saw Hero Maban as the savior, but the Merpeople did not acknowledge it. Though that was all hundreds of years ago..."

"Will the misunderstanding clear now?"

"Yes, your effort has resolved all misunderstandings. I will represent the Merpeople and send an ambassador to the Meow to apologize for the wrongs so far. I do not doubt the era of hostility will end, and an era of harmony and peace will come." Queen smiled and nodded.

"Also we will not forget the favor you have done for us. You have returned our patron guardian Gallic to us. You have done what no one, let alone a Merperson was able to do. As the hero of the Merpeople, I give you our most heartfelt thanks."

The Mermaid Queen approached and gave Ark a kiss. At Ark's embarrassment, the Mermaid Queen laughed softly as she spoke, "This is the sign of thanks Merpeople convey to someone who has become a true friend."

'Ah, so she does know.'

Ark remembered Adelaine's last kiss and let out a bitter smile.

"You are the most heroic friend and benefactor of the mermaids. I, the Queen of the Merpeople, do so vow. Just as you have sacrificed for the Merpeople, and we promise to help with all our strength when you are in need."

"For the benefactor!" The Merpeople pulled out their swords and raised them

as they shouted.

- The Encroaching Darkness quest has been completed.

When the quest was completed, his level rose by 1 and became 65.

But Ark was restless.

The process of the story was progressing similar to the quest with the young Lord of Jackson. The story of them becoming friends and what not, and sending him right off without a single reward!

But Ark's worry was baseless.

Perhaps because she was a Queen in name, she was quite different from the young Lord.

"This is the small gift we have prepared to thank you for your work."

The Mermaid Queen gave him an armor made out of transparent scale.

Guardian Armor of Merpeople (Magic)

Armor Type	Leather Armor

Defense	80	Durability	100
Weight	35	Usage Restriction	Level 60

Guardian armor, only Warriors who has received the recognition of the Merpeople can equip. Legends say it is made from the scales of a Sea Dragon. It is a light and soft material, so one can move with great ease. In addition, anyone who equips this armor will not receive any water-related damage or penalties.

Option: Water Attribute Resistance +100%, Penalty based on water is nullified.

Ark's eyes became very wide.

With many options related to water it still has an defense of 80. It is 2 times better than the Black Demon Mouse armor I'm using now! Even if it is a magic item just by looking at its defense, this is an s-class rare item.

Leather armor he obtained from Andel had better defense than a level 40 Plated armor.

The only thing that bothered him was with his magic repair skill level, he would not be able to repair it himself.

'Che, if it wasn't for that I could have sold it at rare item price.'

"There is one more thing I would like from you"

"If it is for the Merpeople I would be willing to do anything." Ark perked his ears and nodded.

"Since we have lived in isolation for too long, there is no one within the Merpeople who knows the outside world. Therefore we would like you to go to the Meow as the ambassador of the Merpeople and convey our apologies."

Envoy of the Merpeople

The Queen of the Merpeople regrets the past and wishes to reconcile with the Meow. Merpeople and Meow; you who is friendly with both, has a high chance of reconciling the two tribes.

Difficulty: G

Quest Requirement: Meow and Mermaid intimacy must be over 70%.

The quest requirement makes the difficulty a G. It also doesn't seem like a quest that will make money.

But Ark always welcomes a quest.

"I understand."

"But I don't know if I can meet with them. According the rumors floating around the ocean, they have also been hiding from those on land..."

"If that's what you're concerned about, there's no need to worry."

Ark laughed silently and brushed aside what she said. And told the tale of

how he saved the Meow in the ruins and obtained the title of 'Cat Knight'.

"If I go the Meow will forgive the past misunderstanding."

"No way, to think you'd have such a relationship with the Meow... I see. Finally I can understand why you were able to find Nodelesse and free Adelaine. You... in the end came to keep your promise with Adelaine."

"Perhaps I did."

"Then it would be good for you, the Seeker of Truth, to keep the precious stone Adelaine kept. I can't really explain it to you, but if I'm right, the stone told of in legend is the Hero Maban's, one of the three."

"The legendary three?"

"It's one of the three stones that contains the power of the Hero Maban. They disappeared with Hero Maban so their whereabouts are unknown. It's a rumor that Hero Maban left one of the three in the Subterranean when he traveled there."

'Its the information regarding quest for the next job!'

Ark immediately asked. "Where is Subterranean?"

"That is something nobody knows. They are a small tribe like us, but before the dark age, the Subterranean inhabitants lived disconnected. They were a tribe shrouded in a veil. The only person who talked to them was Hero Maban."

Although he was disappointed of not knowing where it was, he at least had a clue.

"Well then, lets get out. Everyone would want to look at the face of the hero."

Queen lead Ark outside.

Coming out of the castle, Nodelesse's countless Mermaids and Mermen cheered. After passing the square filled with Merpeople, he covered with kisses.

He could handle the female Mermaid's kisses, but it was really hard to withstand kisses from rough Mermen and grey bearded elderly.

When they got out of the square and reached the entrance, the Queen said.

"Gallic has finally returned to the Merpeople, and will remain with us for hundreds of years. Even if you traveled across the endless ocean, you won't be able to find us. However, the country of the Merpeople will return. Until that time, please hold on to this."

Queen handed him a small flute.

Flute of the Merpeople (Special)

A flute that allows you to call Merpeople friends. You can use it anywhere at sea.

After Ark received the flute, he took few steps and at that moment, all of Nodelesse shook. The floor cracked as if there was an earthquake and the

entire city rose up. Gigantic White Whale Gallic had lifted the entire city.

Gallic rolled his building-like eyes looking at Ark and let out a resonating roar. Then he sprayed tsunami like current and cut through the ocean.

The colorful underwater city Nodelesse slowly got further. Clearing up its dark history, it was leaving to find its home after hundreds of years.

'Haa, for some reason I feel empty.'

Ark looked at Nodelesse blankly until it was out of his sight.

It was a place where many thing had happened. But it wasn't something he could take with him, and on land, there was more adventure, experience, and items waiting for Ark!

Ark blew on the Flute of the Merpeople.

Since he was underwater, there would be no way sound would come out, but after few seconds, countless dolphins came. The dolphin lowered its body to indicate to him to ride on.

When Ark got on, the dolphins went up at incredible speed heading to the water surface.

Countless dolphins came above the water surface as they sprayed water. Then like a surfboard they started to speedily go to shore.

Although it took a few days to reach Nodelesse, by riding on the dolphins, it didn't even take 30 minutes. In the distance the appearance of a lovely shore

was revealed.

Battle of Grey Ridge

"Do you know you've committed a sin worthy of death?"

"Yes, I've really reflected a lot on it. Something was wrong with my head when I suddenly rose to success after spending my earlier days so deprived. If you would just give me one more chance..."

"And to whom do you owe your success to?"

"Of course, it's thanks to Master. I was impudent without knowing your grace."

Dedric shed large drops of tears.

'Look at the rascal.' Ark laughed to himself.

Ark had lived while unwillingly receiving affected sympathy from many people. Thanks to that, he gained an unwelcome ability; by simply looking at the other person's eyes, he could tell if the words coming from their mouth were sincere or not.

Dedric's words were not sincere.

He was just an NPC, but he knew how to cunningly trick someone.

'It seems I shouldn't have thoughtlessly evolved him.'

Bat also had a bad personality, but he wasn't cunning. After evolving into Dedric, he learned how to be crafty. It meant ego also increases with each evolution. He wasn't sincere, but it seemed Dedric had yielded this time. However, there was no guarantee it would be this easy if it happens again.

Skull was the same. Though it was a faithful Familiar now, there was no way of telling how it would change when it evolved.

'Summons are also intelligent beings.'

This incident changed how Ark viewed his Familiars.

Each Familiar had a different personality. Even so, Ark tried to treat the Familiars equally. He didn't favor one and neglect the others. That was the problem.

'Seems like I have to use control; the carrot and stick approach.'

Just as there are fellows who do better if you praise them, there are those who get cocky. In addition, there are those who perform properly only with the use of violence and threats.

Granted, even a good medicine can be counterproductive if overdosed, he would need to regulate it.

This was why Ark had beaten Dedric to the point where it seemed overboard. Even the highly loyal Skull or Snake might change personalities one day. To prepare for that day, he set an example with Dedric. In other words, Dedric had been severely punished because he was unfortunately chosen to set an example.

'Whew, it isn't easy taking care of 3 Familiars. I think I can finally understand how hard it is for teachers who have to teach dozens.'

"Alright, since you contributed, I'll forgive you this time as promised."
"Ahh! Thank you, Master."

"Repeat after me, vow one!"

"What?" Dedric tilted his head but quickly raised his hand when Ark pierced him with a glare.

"Vow one!"

"I will always obey Master no matter the situation. I will always serve him

with a smiling face, fight when told to fight, and die when told to die. My life and death only belong to Master."

"Vow two!"

"I will gratefully accept and eat the food given by Master. Also, I will never complain."

"Vow three!"

"If I cannot follow the previous two vows, I will soundly receive some form of punishment."

Dedric's face paled at the continuing Familiar doctrine.

"You've memorized it all, right?"

"Yes..."

"Good, then return to the Netherworld and stay there and write an apology letter until I call you again."

Dedric returned to the Netherworld looking as if he'd stepped in poop.

With this, the coup d'etat that started with the evolution was hopelessly suppressed. In addition, he even formed a slave contract.

The Child Protection Agency or the Animal Welfare Organization would be appalled if they knew about this. But this was a game, and Ark was truly a dictator.

* * *

Not far from the shore where the dolphins dropped him off, Ark saw a village. It was a bustling village, with quite a lot of users coming in and out. Snake wasn't a problem since it was disguised as a belt as usual, but Skull or Bat would attract a lot of attention from the users, so they were no good. After sending the Familiars back, Ark walked towards the village.

‘Huhuhu, how long has it been?’ As he headed to the village, Ark had a delighted smile on his face.

The store in Nodeless didn’t purchase the items he’d obtained in the ocean. Thanks to that, his bag and, of course, Snake, were chock full of items from the ocean. Since his Magic Restoration reached Intermediate, all the items had 100% durability. Still, though they were rare, they were still japtēm. They couldn’t be sold for a lot of money.

There was something else that made Ark feel good. It was the bag of pearls he earned in Nodelesse. He had earned a colossal amount of at least 800 pearls from item sales, his food stall, and repairs. Although it was a low-class jewel compared to others, it was still a jewel. So, how could he not be happy!?

After entering the village, Ark immediately sought out the General Store.

“Welcome! What can I do for you?” A pleasant-faced store owner greeted Ark.

“I wish to sell all these things. How much would you give me?”

As Ark took out the mountainous pile of japtēm, the owner’s mouth opened wide. There was leather from all sorts of marine monsters, coral, and underwater equipment. Even though they were japtēm, they were items hard to see on land.

The store owner calculated the prices one by one and proposed an amount. “For all of it, it’s 34 Gold. You won’t find a better price anywhere else nearby.”

The market value wasn't bad.

'If it's this much, I won't make a loss even if I sell the pearls.' Ark nodded as he held out the pearls. "How much can you give me for this?"

"Ohh, these are pretty good quality pearls, and there's 800 of them... Where did you get them from?"

"I can't give you the specifics."

"Well, there's no need for me to know."

The store owner carefully inspected the pearls and flicked the beads on an abacus.

"I'll pay 25 Silver a piece. So in total, it'll be 200 Gold."

A look of slight disappointment spread across Ark's face. He had expected 300 Gold; it was 100 Gold short.

'Should I just go to Harun or Jackson to sell them?'

If he were to go back to Harun or Jackson, where he had high Intimacy, he could get the expected 300 Gold, but it would take a full week to return to Jackson. The monsters he would encounter while going were only level 40, so a round trip meant he had to give up on a fortnight's worth of EXP.

100 Gold or a fortnight of experience. There was no contest.

'I'll have to go sometime because of the 'Envoy of the Merpeople' quest, but

I don't have time to do that right now. Since I've come this far, I have to at least visit a few cities. It's regretful, but it's better to just sell them.'

"Ah!"

At that moment, a user looking at goods in the shop saw Ark and made a shocked expression. Then, with a somewhat angered voice, he pulled Ark by the arm and said, "How could you sell the items without even consulting me? Even if you do sell, you have to sell it after settling the problem of distribution first. Mister, we'll return a little later."

[T/N: The other user is pretending Ark is his party member, which is why he's offended Ark would try to sell the items without figuring out who gets what first.]

"You do that."

Ark who was dragged out without being able to say anything, freed his arm.

"Who are you? I think you have the wrong person."

"Ah, I'm sorry. You were surprised because I suddenly butted in, huh?"

The man was a Hobbit. He was short and had rounded ears. Since he was covered with many bags, he looked like he was a Merchant. Actually, Ark had let himself be dragged out without a word because he thought it might be some kind of event. But after coming out, the manner of speech and behavior showed he wasn't an NPC.

"They call me Sid. As you can see, I'm a Hobbit Merchant."

"I'm Ark, but, do you know me?"

"Nope, this is the first time we've met. But it was a pity to watch you, so I intervened."

"What do you mean by a pity?"

"This village's store is famous in the area for having a low market value. The more you sell, the more you lose. Earlier, you figured the item you were selling was at market price, but you can't find out the true market value like that. If items with high and low values are mixed, there are lots of times when you feel it's generally an alright deal since the sum is similar to what you expect on average. Plus, the value of pearls is low because this village is close to the seaside. If you take them to a city two days away from here and sell, you'll get about 40 Silver a piece."

"40 Silver a piece! Is that true?"

Didn't it mean he could get a whole 120 Gold more just by investing two days into travelling? Cold sweat ran down his back. He had been about to squander 120 Gold from a momentary mistake.

"Of course, and if I help you a bit, there's a way to earn another 48 Gold or so." Sid laughed as he implied more profit.

At this point, Ark was more wary than surprised.

"There's no such thing as 'free' in this world though?"

"Of course, it's give and take. There is something I want. Don't you want to hear the details?"

The profession of Merchant was rather vague. Merchant was the sole profession who could carry 6 bags. In addition, they were able to learn all

sorts of production skills, and they received a considerable bonus when dealing with NPCs. Even if their Intimacy was at rock bottom, they could gain a 20% profit from buying and selling with high trading ability. Thanks to that, they could grasp a fair amount of money from their beginning days.

The problem was combat. Since they carry a lot of luggage, they didn't have a single combat-related skill, and even received a huge penalty in combat. Even if they were over level 50, defeating a single level 20 monster on their own was too much. Additionally, the EXP they could get from defeating a monster was only 50%.

A Merchant raises their level through trading. They use the market prices of goods between various village and cities. They sell goods they bought at a cheap price in a place where it has a higher market value. This was the basic growth method of a Merchant.

Of course, they couldn't raise the EXP and earn money simply by trading, because the market prices constantly changes. For a Merchant, information is their lifeline. If they weren't able to constantly keep their ears open and accurately predict the market value, they would suffer sorely. Even if they traded successfully, there were cases where they actually succumbed to bankruptcy. It was a complex profession, in its own way. It was hard to raise, but the growth factor had its own kind of fun.

They traded while carrying bags in the beginning, but, later, they could buy a wagon or a merchant ship to ferry more trade goods. Moreover, they could ply the top ranks and take the lead in trade between Kingdoms.

The larger a single transaction, farther they go, and more they trade while passing through more dangerous places, the greater the EXP and skill

proficiency they can gain.

However, New World was a place with poor public safety. The travels of a Merchant, with their nonexistent combat ability, was an adventure gambling their life and fortune. If they encountered a powerful thief monster while traveling, they would suffer a huge loss. If it was really bad, they would even have to declare bankruptcy. Therefore, they needed to hire mercenary NPCs or high-leveled users as guards for long distances. This was also what Sid proposed to Ark.

“Giran, a commerce city, is two days away from this village. It’s like a capital for Merchants and production-class users. And the pearls you have, Ark-nim, are a material greatly sought by production-class users. Many Beginner and Intermediate production items require pearls, you see. Of course, since the supply is always insufficient at Giran, the market price is at its highest. Honestly, if I could afford it, it’s to the point that I’d want to buy them right away.”

“Basically, you’re asking me to escort you to Giran?”

As Ark Made an unreadable expression, Sid quickly added, “You definitely won’t regret it. I have the skill to trade jewels, so if I trade in your place, I can get 15% more. Considering the market price of pearls in is 40 Silver, then the current total is 320 Gold. 15% on 320 Gold is 48 Gold. So, in conclusion, you can make 168 more Gold than the store from earlier. If I also sell the japtem, you can receive a bit more. It’s good for me, since I’ll raise my EXP, and Ark-nim gets to make more money.”

'168 Gold.'

Though he didn't use Eyes of the Cat, Ark's eyes glowed golden. He could earn an additional 168 Gold by investing two days of in-game time, 16 hours.

Although he made a rule of not trusting users, it was a different story for this much profit. 168 Gold was 1,680,000 won. It wasn't an amount he could easily ignore when living a life that required even a single penny more. Moreover, he'd already been thinking of looking for the surrounding cities anyway. If he went with Sid, who knew the road, he could cut down the time.

However, Ark still felt uneasy about readily accepting. Reselling the pearls, didn't that actually mean Ark would have to hand over all the pearls to him? How could he trust him and hand over the pearls?

As if he knew what Ark was thinking, Sid laughed as he pulled out parchment and a pen. Then, when he wrote a few things down and passed it to Ark, a new information window popped up.

Merchant's Contract

This is the contract for recording when a Merchant's profession specialty skill is used for the business of re-selling, exchanging, or acting as the proxy of another user.

If you sign the contract, the Merchant will be validated to make deals, has the right to act as the proxy for the other user's business, and is obligated to return the promised sum. If the Merchant violates the contract, the Merchant Guild will be alerted, the Merchant's reliability stat and fame will plummet, and you can charge twice as much as the contracted amount. When the contract is complete, the contract will be automatically discarded.

Contract Contents: Resale of Ark's pearls, the contract will come into effect the moment the pearls are handed to Sid in Giran. Sid must give all the money obtained from the sale of pearls to Ark.

"Now, you can believe me with this, eh?"

A contract can be set up from a normal trade to a loan, bill, special trade, or almost any situation. It was like a document certifying that if there was a problem by any chance, all the responsibility would fall on the Merchant. The reason Merchants had high reliability from other users was exactly thanks to this unique contract skill.

'Definitely... if there's a contract like this, there won't be any chance of getting backstabbed.'

"Okay, I'll accompany you."

"Great choice. Since you were able to obtain so many pearls, you should be over level 60, right?"

"I'm level 65."

"That's acceptable. Since we've finally gotten 3 people, we can be on our way."

"Huh? There are other companions?"

"There are two ways to get to Giran. The long way would take about 3 to 4 days. But if we want to get there in 2 days time, the only way is to cross Grey Ridge. However, high level monsters like Trolls and Stalkers are camped out

on Grey Ridge, so we need 3 level 60 players."

"But I'm..."

"The other people are waiting at the inn. Let's go, I will introduce them to you."

Sid dragged Ark to the inn without giving him any time to say a word. Two men, named Leo and Hargen, were sitting in the inn. Seeing as they were wearing plate armor, both seemed to be in combat-related professions.

Once Sid introduced Ark, they expressed looks of obvious dislike.

"Sid-nim, you didn't mention your intent to find another companion."

"We can pass the Grey Mountains with just the two of us."

"I'm sorry. We met by chance inside the store, so we decided to go together. I know the two of you are enough, but as I've said before, I have a reason to get to Giran as soon as possible. Three is faster than two."

"And the escort fee?" asked Hargen, who had an axe tattoo on his face, as he glanced at Ark.

"I will pay the escort fee we first agreed upon, since Ark-nim is also going to Giran with the intent to sell goods. I decided to make the sale on his behalf as payment in exchange for escorting me."

"What did you agree to sell for him that would substitute for the escort fee?"

"Pearls. Perhaps because he wasn't able to visit a village for long time, he

collected quite a lot."

Sid was boundlessly talkative. Whether it was in-game or real life, there are many humans who will cluster if it seems like you have some money. As expected, as soon as they heard Ark had items worth quite a sum, the two warriors examined Ark with gummy eyes.

Though their appearances were unlikable, their actions were just as disagreeable. However, it would be no good for him to withdraw when he had already agreed to accompany Sid just because he didn't like them.

'I won't see them after 16 hours anyway, so I'll endure.'

After finishing his conversation with the warriors, Sid took out a scroll. It was a [Low-Level Inspection] scroll.

"Then before we go, I would like to do a basic check up. Please understand."

The very first thing a Merchant did when choosing a player mercenary or an escort was to check their information. If they were chaotic players, then there was the chance of being backstabbed. Since the scroll was low level, Ark couldn't check the information. Therefore, Sid explained for Ark.

"Leo-nim is level 64 and Hargen-nim is level 62, both of them job-changed to Warrior."

Warrior was an open profession, but it was a special profession that required 150 Strength.

If you didn't raise your character while intending to become a Warrior from

the beginning, it would be difficult to job-change even at level 30. In other words, they were players who had prior knowledge before they began playing the game. They were users who knew much as information as Sid.

"Wow, Ark-nim is really level 65. With this party, 10 hours will be enough to cross Grey Ridge. But your profession is Dark Walker. This is the first time I've heard of it. What kind of profession is it?"

"It's an ordinary thief," Ark answered lightly.

Perhaps it was the image of the name 'Dark Walker', but Sid and the Warriors nodded without thinking much about it. Thief-related professions weren't popular, so there were almost no people who knew the details behind them.

"Ark-nim is the highest level-wise, but it'll probably be a bit difficult to take the lead since you're a Thief. Please leave the front to Leo and Hargen and cover the back. Is that okay?"

"Yes, that's comfortable for me too."

"Then, we'll leave after another 20 minutes."

"We're not going to go right away?"

When Ark, to whom every minute and second was precious, asked that, Leo snickered and asked, "Perhaps you've never rested in an inn before?"

The cheapest inns took 1 Silver and the expensive places took up to 1 Gold.

Heath can be recovered while resting on the ground, so why would you pay money to rest at an inn? That's why Ark had never entered an inn.

But Sid explained with a surprised expression.

"Like the time in the store, Ark-nim doesn't seem to know much about the game despite being level 65. The reason people pay to stay in an inn is because of the buff."

"Buff?"

"You can get a buff if you rest at an inn. It's a buff that lasts 1 hour per 10 minutes, for a maximum of 3 hours. The inns have different prices because the buff effects are different. There are places that slightly raise Strength or Agility. Some places even have a buff that raise EXP gain by 20%. This place increases movement speed by 30% and Health by 10%. There is merit in waiting for 30 minutes."

He had no idea. He didn't think inns would have such a secret.

'No wonder everyone was visiting inns strangely often...'

It was information he could have used if he'd known beforehand. Basic information like this wasn't on the site forums. No, it could be that it was too basic to even put on the forums. In any case, Ark didn't even know such basic information because he'd never interacted with users much.

'Minor info like this can be a big help in the game.'

He added another goal of the journey. 'For 16 hours, I need to gather some info.'

He couldn't keep living as a beginner forever.

* * *

"Bring it on, Giant's Strength!"

At the booming cry, the muscles in Leo's body pulsed as they grew.

It was the might of the job specific skill that increases Strength and Stamina by 30.

With increased Strength, Leo swung his shield and hammer as he charged at a Troll.

A Troll is a humongous, 4 meter tall monster, but his opponent was a Warrior! A fighter who specializes in hunting big monsters.

As all sorts of skills were applied, the Troll staggered as it lost its balance with each strike of the hammer. When the final blow was struck on its brow, the Troll collapsed weakly. At the same time, Hargen faced a Stalker while swinging his two-handed axe.

Leo and Hargen boasted their incredible strength as Warriors.

Equipped with a shield and plate armor, Leo took decent blows without a care, and the Stalker getting hit by Hargen wielding his two-handed axe was getting thrown around like a baseball. They didn't land critical blows because they were Strength-focused characters, but they easily took out a level 73 troll and three level 66 Stalkers with only normal hits.

Regardless, Ark made an apathetic expression.

'They fight in a really boring manner.'

The two Warriors were weirdly strong for their level. Based on fighting techniques alone, they were incomparably lousy. They didn't even consider avoiding the attacks coming at them. That was characteristic of fighters wearing high defense plate armor. They ignored incoming attacks and just blindly swung their weapons. They didn't pay any attention to distributing their power, managing the distance, or accuracy. They also kept using their skills until all their Mana ran out.

After clearing a group of monsters, Hargen hefted the axe onto his shoulder and boasted, "Hahaha, what did I tell you? With just Leo and me, even Grey Ridge is no problem. From now on we'll handle it, so Sid-nim and Ark-nim, just watch from the back."

Of course he was doing just that.

'I can't understand deliberately rushing up to fight.'

The group made a party in the village and hit the road. Thanks to this, the EXP was automatically shared even if he didn't fight. Granted, you could get more EXP by contributing more to the fight, but it wasn't worth the loss of equipment durability.

In addition, Ark had no experience in party hunting. Since Leo and Hargen fought in a completely different manner, there would be too many problems if Ark tried to squeeze in.

'Well, since it's only a hunting ground of this level, I'll just sit back.' Ark distanced himself and spent his time striking the backs of fleeing

monsters.

"Good work. Here's some food!"

Once the fight ended, Sid immediately brought out food. Sid showed an extremely submissive attitude to the reliable Mercenaries. Well, since they were outside the village, Sid's life was in the hands of the Mercenaries, so that was a given.

Carrying as many as 6 bags at once, it was a profession that could get a hold of a lot of money from the beginning. There was once a time when Ark was envious of Merchants.

But, after looking at Sid, those thoughts disappeared. They do earn money, but without the help of other players, they wouldn't even be able to trade properly.

They had to waste their money to pay escort fees and bow to the tastes of others. It wasn't a profession that suited the single-minded Ark.

'Even though he said there's a comfortable path, why does he want to employ Mercenaries to travel by this road?'

With sudden doubt, Ark asked while chewing on the free food, "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I spent my fortune on silk from the Southern region. However, the prices of silk can change in just a few days. If Merchants who bought silk at the same time were to sell them in Giran, then I can incur a loss instead. Since I invested my whole fortune on it, it could bankrupt me. So in order to get

there even one day sooner, I haven't slept properly in days."

"If the market price is good, how much would you earn?"

"I still won't earn a lot. Silk doesn't have a large margin. Price gain is around 2%? With the travel fee and escort fee on top of that, there's nothing left."

Perched on top of a rock, Sid answered while swinging his legs.

"But, since I've invested my fortune on this, as long as I get a profit, my EXP will greatly increase. The greater the risk, the greater the experience. And since silk's market value changes frequently, there aren't many Merchants who trade it in bulk, so it's a good opportunity to raise my market share. Truthfully, that is my objective, rather than money or experience."

"Market share?"

The lives of combat professions relied on EXP and items, but Merchants relied on profit and market shares. Market share was a kind of reward provided to players who consistently traded one type of good. A Merchant with a set amount of market share could get all sorts of bonuses. They can also be exempted from taxes, get quests from craftsmen NPC's, and get profit from related trade goods. If they held the maximum share, they could even earn a monopolized trading privilege with a Lord.

The additional effects of that were enormous. You acquired info about which items would soon be in demand, and, once you gained a monopolized relationship, raising your level or making money was a cinch. Therefore, the Merchants' fight to raise market share first was vicious.

Some Merchants even went as far as to suffer a loss to lower market value if they saw another Merchant coming in with trade goods from afar.

Even if it wasn't from player interference, prices plummeted and skyrocketed if New World's economy and political situation changed. Because of this, Merchants always have to be keen and able to read the flow of the whole continent.

Information soon becomes money. To Merchants, this is common sense.

Sid held vast information as an effect of that.

“One day, I will get a monopoly on the economy of the Schudenberg Kingdom.”

Sid stamped his foot as he boldly revealed his ambition.

Although seeing a small, cute Hobbit talking boldly was not very convincing...

In any case, Sid was risking everything on this journey.

He poured in his whole fortune in order to raise market share, and even bought silk with a loan from the Merchant Guild. If the market value plummeted before he arrived, it was instant bankruptcy for him, and he'd be reduced to sewing leather and getting peanuts in a corner of the city.

'Being a Merchant isn't an easy profession either.'

Ark felt it was actually much harder to be Merchant than a fighter.

Then, while Ark and Sid were talking, Leo and Hargen were whispering amongst themselves from a distance. They'd been doing that more often after entering Grey Ridge.

'I have a really bad feeling about this...'

Out of nowhere, he suddenly got an uncomfortable feeling.

Ark's ominous sense hit the mark.

2 hours after leaving village, the party had reached the entrance region of Grey Ridge. After sweeping another monster mob and resting, a message suddenly popped up.

- You have been kicked out
from the party.

Leo, who was commanding the fight in the front, had the position of party leader. In other words, Leo kicked Ark out of the party, and it wasn't just Ark. Sid, who also got the expulsion message, tilted his head.

"Excuse me, Leo-nim. I've been disbanded from the party?"

Leo suddenly changed his expression as he said, "We aren't going any further."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Sid blinked as if he did not understand the situation.

Leo grinned and swung his hammer around.

"Since there's no more business to see with you, I'm telling ya to hand over all the silk and fuck off. Ark, if you leave all your pearls and scram like a good boy, I won't kill you in light of our time so far. You understand without further explanation, yes?"

"Per-perhaps from the beginning...?"

"Of course. Do you think I, Hargen, followed you this far just to earn peanuts?"

"Y-you can't. These goods are what I've bought with my entire fortune. If I lose this I will go bankrupt. I would rather die!"

"If you say that much, then there's no choice. Damn it, even though this is expensive."

Leo took out and ripped a red scroll. "Target Sid, designated mark: silk."

Then, a stream of light came pouring out and hit Sid.

'Is it an attack scroll?'

Ark flinched reflexively, but Sid didn't receive any damage. It doesn't seem to be an attack scroll. However Sid's face immediately turned pale, and he sank down while trembling. Tears poured from his round eyes.

"Please let me go. If I sell the silk in Giran I will give you 50%."

"Why would I do something that difficult when there is an easier way to earn money?"

Ark couldn't comprehend the current situation at all.

When a character became Chaotic, they received a huge penalty. They can't buy or sell anything from the store, let alone enter villages larger than a certain size. They also received criminal status.

If they became Chaotic once, they could remove the status by staying in jail for a few days and paying a fine. Of course, the jail time and the fine were based on their Chaotic value and their level. For those above level 60, the jail time as well as the fine would be no small amount.

No matter how much they wanted the silk, it wasn't worth turning into a Chaotic player. So although Ark had been suspicious of the two's attitudes, he hadn't imagined the worst case scenario.

That wasn't all he couldn't understand. Since he was a Merchant, there would be some japtém inside his bags besides the silk. Even if Sid was murdered, the chance of the silk dropping was rare. However, Leo and Sid both seem to think the silk was guaranteed to drop.

'Just what exactly is going on here?'

"I'm sorry, but it's unavoidable since we also need to survive!"

As Leo abruptly rushed forward swinging his two-handed axe, Ark still hadn't come up with a plan. If they were monsters, he was confident he could take down two or three even if they were level 70.

However, his opponent were players, two of them were too much to face

even for Ark.

'Should I run away?' Ark was thinking that, but then—

"Dammit, then I will have to prepare for some losses!"

Sid quickly took out a scroll and, when he ripped it, disappeared with light. It was the effect of the incredibly rare and expensive [Warp] scroll.

"That bastard, he was hiding a warp scroll."

Leo ground his teeth after slamming the hammer on the ground.

"Hng, did you think I'll let such easy prey get away? [Trace]!"

Without delay, Leo quickly used another scroll and his eyes glowed red. With glowing red eyes, Leo looked around and found Sid scrambling away about 200 meters away. It was an odd fight using all sorts of scrolls.

Leo shouted while chasing Sid, "Hargen, you take care of robbing him! You can face him alone, yeah?"

"Of course." Hargen laughed as he looked at Ark. "You don't intend to obediently hand over the pearls anyways, right?"

Hargen did the same thing as Leo—he took out a scroll and marked the pearls. As with before, Ark couldn't figure out the scroll's identity, but it seems it didn't deal any damage. Afterwards, Hargen immediately swung his two-handed axe as he charged.

It was an absurd situation.

'What's with this guy? What does he believe in, to think he can stand up against me?'

Hargen was 3 levels lower than Ark. He definitely knew that fact. So why is he trying to take Ark down alone?

'Does he think he can take me down because I'm a Thief?'

If so, it was actually welcoming. Ark had been worried because there were two level 60+ players. If there was one opponent, even if the opponent was a higher level, he was confident he could defeat him.

Ark quickly did an evasive movement as he swung his sword.

A heavy sound rang out, but Hargen immediately used the skill again as if he didn't receive much impact. Ark fended off the blow with this sword, but he still took an incredible amount of damage.

'Wh-what? Is this really damage of a level 62 player?'

It was completely different from what he'd seen while they were fighting monsters. Ark used Eyes of the Cat, and his face hardened.

'Huh? What is going on?'

With Eyes of the Cat, he saw Hargen's level was actually 71.

In addition, he was a Chaotic player!

He was certain Sid checked their levels and status before leaving the village. Level 62 with Neutral status. But in just 4 hours, the info had changed to something completely different. After using his head for a moment, Ark finally understood the situation.

'I fell for it. Was Sid also a part of this?'

Sid had checked the info. And since Sid, whom he had met by chance, had said the info was like that, Ark had just believed him. That situation had been so natural that even the doubtful Ark had blindly believed it.

So In the end, Sid and Leo had just been acting!

'They were aiming for me from the beginning. Damn bastards!'

Rage surged within him.

'I definitely shouldn't trust the likes of players!'

"Alright, let's go at it then. I will make you regret believing in your level and coming at me alone. Dark Blade!"

Lancel's sword grazed a spot on Hargen's side that was glowing red.

- You have dealt a critical hit!

Hargen flinched and took a step back. Even with his plated armour, he lost 10% of his Health in one blow.

"This bastard, he has good luck. Though it'll be useless!"

Hargen still made an expression of overwhelming confidence.

It seemed he believed the critical hit was nothing but a fluke. Hargen's level was 71, Ark's was 65. With a whopping 6 level difference, he believed there was no way he could lose. But it didn't take long for him to realize how terrible a misunderstanding that was.

The accuracy and attack speed he had polished underwater!

Ark's sword and kicks rained down like a flash.

Ba-ba-bam!

Kicks were different from sword strikes. Swords only gave damage, but kicks gave knockback, or a stun effect at a set rate. In addition, the enemy was a heavily armored Warrior; whenever the shower of kicks imparted a special status effect, he couldn't balance his weight and was pushed back as he staggered.

"Wha-what? What is wrong with my body?"

Hargen shouted his frustration at the special effects of the kicks.

The heavily armored Hargen couldn't follow Ark's movements. He also couldn't defend himself properly. Trained from underwater battle, Ark's sword precisely pierced into the gaps of the armor.

A heavily armored fighter was no different from a crab. The joints in armor have very low defense. In addition, the Dark Blade Ark occasionally released totally ignored defense.

In an instant, Hargen only had 10% of his Health left.

"H-how the hell did this happen?"

In front of the suffering Hargen's eyes, Ark lifted his leg. It paused in the air for a split second before falling like a thunder bolt down on Hargen's head.

HAMMER KICK!

Stunned, Hargen fell to one knee. His body flashed red.

Double Critical Chance!

- With Double Critical Chance, you have landed
2x a critical hit.

Ark seized the opportunity and killed Hargen.

"There's no way this can be..."

As if he couldn't believe it, Hargen stammered as he was forced to log out.

- You have defeated a level 71 Chaotic player. Fame +40.

The helmet Hargen had been wearing tumbled down.

"Dedric, turn into a Bat and find Sid and Leo!"

Ark summoned Dedric and ground his teeth.

If they'd been playing Ark, they would definitely be waiting nearby for the fight to end. The bastards had conspired and tricked Ark. He was of a mind to chase them even to the depths of hell for revenge. If he didn't kill them, his rage would not subside.

'They can never be forgiven!'

"They're not too far from here!"

"Lead the way."

Ark equipped the Guardian Armor of the Merpeople he'd been saving and had Dedric take the lead.

The Guardian Armor couldn't be repaired by repair boxes. The only way to repair it was with Magic Restoration, but he'd tried not to use it since that was only Intermediate. But the current situation was different.

* * *

After entering the forest, he saw a strange scene unfolding.

He'd been certain the two would be giggling together, but the situation was no different from before. Sid was running as if his feet were on fire. Leo was chasing after him spitting curses. As if he'd already taken a few hits, Sid had only about 30% of his Health left.

'What is going on? Aren't they on the same side?'

At that moment, Leo's hammer hit Sid's back.

It wasn't an attack a Merchant could defend against with their incomparably lousy defense.

Sid collapsed as he instantly fell into a critical condition.

"Dammit, you nasty bastard!"

"Huhuhu, isn't this also one of the enjoyments of the game?" Leo raised his hammer while sporting a vile smile.

At that moment, Leo's face was covered by Dedric.

"Wh-what is this? A Bat?"

Ba-bang!

At the same time, a strong attack landed on Leo's back.

He'd been watching the situation from a distance, but Ark shortened the gap in a moment and let fly a Backstab attack. He couldn't understand what was going on, but for now he decided they weren't allies.

Leo turned his head and his facial expression turned twisted.

"H-how did you...?"

"Ask your friend after you revive."

Ark didn't give him a moment and immediately poured forth a chain of Sword-Hand attacks.

'The bastard's level is 73, but if he's around Hargen's skill, he isn't a tough opponent.'

Leo was stronger than Hargen.

First, his level was higher, and his equipment was better. Additionally, because of his shield, it wasn't easy to aim at the gaps in his armor.

But Leo was still not a match for Ark.

"Uhh, what is this? A Bat?"

Dedric, trying to earn back some trust from Ark, desperately held on. He repeatedly scratched Leo's face while matching the timing of the hammer swings and backing off.

As expected, after receiving Ark's rigorous training, Dedric's battle sense was outstanding. In the current situation, he was determining what attack would be most helpful to Ark. As Dedric continued with the attacks, Leo's accuracy with his hammer dramatically fell. Such sloppy attacks were met with crazy strong counter-attacks. As Leo swung his hammer, a counter attack swept past through the gap in the shield.

If a counter-attack succeeds, the attack power increases by 50%!

No matter how good the armor was, there is no way it could handle 150% of the normal attack. In addition, armor is not something that can be continuously used. Leo's armor became tattered in the blink of an eye and his Health was dropping wildly.

"Dammit! You're dead!"

Pressed to near critical state, Leo pulled out a potion.

'High-grade recovery potion!'

There were all kinds of potions. There is the low class potion, which recovers 100 Health, intermediate potion, which recovers 300 Health, and high class potion which recovers 500 Health. There are also no specific restriction in terms of drinking a Health potion, so as long as one had money they could recover Health anytime. Ark had never once doubted a system like this.

If so, didn't that mean you would never die if you drank high-class potions like water? However, Ark soon found the flaw in this system.

It lay in the time it takes to drink the potion. While opening the bag and drinking the potion, they are in a completely defenseless state. Of course, this will lead to a higher chance of receiving a critical hit. In the end, even if they drink a 500 Health potion, if they were to lose 500 Health while they were drinking it, it would do them no good.

That wasn't the only disadvantage. You could intentionally interfere with the player trying to drink a potion. If you attacked the hand, you could make them drop the potion. Ark had learned that when Bat had shoved himself into Andel's mouth while he was trying to drink a potion.

Because of this, Ark almost never drank potions even when fighting monsters. Of course, the same applied when facing players, who were smarter than monsters.

'Idiot, he was just a high-leveled moron.'

"Dark Charge!"

In fact, Dedric was of a higher level than Leo in the ability to deal with a situation. A black aura poured from Dedric's mouth and blocked Leo's vision. Then, while Leo was confused, Dedric charged powerfully and sent a flying kick.

"Agh! Oowww, my head."

With a thump, Dedric staggered about with a fist-sized lump on his head. Leo, who'd been hurriedly about to drink the potion, shook and stumbled as if he'd taken quite a shock.

Ark ordered without any delay, "Snake, it's an item! Eat it!"

Wrapped around Ark's waist, Snake opened its eyes wide and stuck its tongue out. Like a frog catching a fly, it wrapped its tongue around the potion and swallowed it.

The so-called Familiar combo attack!

After seeing Snake smack its lips, Leo shouted his shock.

"EH! Wh-what is this?"

"What's what? You're dead anyways. Dark Blade!"

"Ah, no!" Leo quickly held up his shield.

But before Ark's blade reached the shield, it vanished

Then it appeared in front of Leo's nose and dealt a Critical Hit.

Defense was ignored, and since Dedric, who had been promoted to the magic sword's owner, was summoned, the attack power was even greater. With a violent scream, Leo flew back. He tumbled on the ground until he hit the trunk of the tree and was forced to log out.

Along with 40 bonus Fame, a hammer, two scrolls fell.

"A-Ark-nim...!" Sid, who'd been watching nervously, stammered with a surprised voice.

Well, since the 8 level lower Ark had defeated Leo, of course he'd be surprised.

"Th-thanks to you I survived. I was almost robbed and bankrupted."

After collecting his wits, Sid jumped up and leapt onto Leo's corpse. The reason why the corpse didn't disappear for 24 hours was probably because the developers considered a use like this.

"This rotten bastard! Shitface!"

After panting as he vented his anger, Sid scratched his head.

"Because of me, Ark-nim was in danger. I'm truly ashamed."

By then, Ark had furtively packed up his items. He turned his head. There was nothing but coldness in his eyes towards Sid.

"Just exactly what happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sid-nim, at the inn you said they were lower level than me. You also said nothing about them being Chaotic. So, I thought you and those guys were working together."

"No, NO, I'M NOT! I was also tricked!"

"Tricked? Didn't you use a scroll?"

"Well, Ark-nim may not know."

Sid thought for a moment before remembering the scrolls Leo had dropped.

"First, check the items Leo dropped. That would be faster."

Giran, a Merchant's Battlefield

Hammer of Merciless Destruction (Magic)			
Weapon Type	One-Handed Hammer		
Attack Damage	15~20	Durability	31/50
Weight	60	Usage Restriction	More than 180 Strength
<p>A hammer with a sharp, steel-forged edge, it is difficult to deal with the massive weight, but the power is outstanding. It boasts power mighty enough to reduce decent armor to scrap.</p> <p>Option: +10% Armor destruction, 150% more damage to Undead.</p>			

Spirit of Separation (Magic)			
Defense Type	Steel Helmet		

Defense	40	Durability	11/45
Weight	45	Usage Restriction	More than 200 Strength
<p>A helmet with overlapping layers of thin steel and specially made magic-resistant gold plate in between. Boasting strong defense, it has the effect of protecting the mind from mind-related magic.</p> <p>Option: Mind-related Magic Resistance +30%. Penalty: Agility -10, no penalty if used by a Combat related profession.</p>			
<p>Magic Scroll 'Lie'</p>			

Usage Restriction: Intelligence +60

Scroll made a long time ago by a notorious Rogue Magician, when used, one can change their information for other people to see at will. Can even fool NPCs of their alignment, level, stats, and profession. However, level can only be adjusted to within the range of 10 levels of actual level.

1 hour duration. Single use item.

Magic Scroll 'Robbery'

Usage Restriction: Intelligence +60

Scroll with the ability of a notorious Pirate from a long ago. When used, one can designate an item from a user's bag. While the scroll is in effect, killing the opponent will have a 100% drop rate of designated item. Duplicated items are treated as one item. Note, an equipped item cannot be designated. Effect disappears if the caster dies.

1 hour duration, single use item.

The items Leo and Hargen had dropped were very useful, but Ark's attention was drawn to the scrolls.

'There were scrolls such as these?'

For a user who planned and chose to be Chaotic, wasn't this the best item?! Only then did Ark roughly understood the situation.

The reason why chaotic players like Leo and Hargen were able to enter the village, and why Sid, who even checked their information, didn't know their identity. It was because of the scroll 'Lie.' Also Sid's terror was because of the scroll 'Robbery'. Since Leo used the scroll, he would have dropped all his silk if Sid had died. If he'd lost the silk he bought by investing his whole fortune, there'd be no hope for Sid. He could only declare bankruptcy.

'If I died to Hargen, I would have lost all my pearls.'

Belatedly, just thinking about it caused cold sweat to trickle.

"You get it now, right?"

"Yes, I'm sorry for misunderstanding."

"Not at all— in any case, I would've gone bankrupt if not for you, Ark-nim."

"But the items Leo and Hargen dropped..."

In the craziness, Ark quickly claimed ownership of the items. Before there was talk of something else later, it was better to nail it down now.

Sid nodded as if there was nothing to think about.

"Of course, Ark-nim should get them. And when we arrive in Giran, I'll be sure to repay you for all this. My margin is low so I can't give you much, but I can give you at least 15 Gold."

"Why go so far... Well, though I'd take it if you're offering."

Unlike Hyun Woo, refusal wasn't in Ark's dictionary.

"Yes, I'll be sure to repay you. Ark-nim was almost in big trouble because of me, those bastards, just when will such guys disappear." Sid ground his teeth as if his rage was exploding again.

"Anyway, it's a relief it was settled well."

"By the way..." Sid blew out a sigh as he slumped his shoulders. "If we try to go back to the village and take the safe route, it'll take a few more days. That's the worry. I heard silk prices are falling a lot right now."

"Let's just keep going this way. I need to get to Giran anyways, so I will protect you."

"What? But Ark-nim alone..."

"Don't worry," Ark replied with confidence. "It might take longer than when there were three people, but at this level of difficulty, I can protect you just fine."

Of course, Gray Ridge had a high difficulty. As Sid had said before, at least 3 players between level 50 to 60 were necessary to pass through safely. But it only applied to those who blindly charged in like Leo and Hargen. There was no reason for Ark to do something so idiotic.

If he lured them out one at a time with Dedric and took them down with a concentrated attack with Skull, they weren't very difficult opponents. After all, Ark had hunted even more difficult monsters alone.

Granted, now that the situation had turned out this way, there was really no need to look after Sid. But Ark had his own plan. Even if you fall, you never get up with an empty hand.

"Ah, but..." Ark stopped walking and made a suggestion, "If I take the role of Leo and Hargen..."

"If we can get to Giran, I'll give you the protection fee I promised to give those guys. For both of them combined, I promised 25 Gold," quickly answered Sid, quick on the uptake.

"Of course the reward you promised would be separate?"

"Huh? Ah. Yes..." A look that said Ark was taking it too far surfaced in Sid's eyes, but when Ark spoke as if he would get what he should definitely get, all Sid could do was nod. "Of course I'll give it to you."

"Then, for the trust between us, let's write up a contract." Immediately using what he'd learned, Ark's caution shone.

In the end, Sid had no choice but to reluctantly write up the contract. But it was not the end of Ark's demands.

"Ah, and Merchant bag space is spacious, right? It's just that I don't have room for japtém..."

In other words, he meant to take all the items from hunting for himself! Sucking his victim down to the marrow once he caught them, Ark's tenacity was aroused.

Sid nodded with a sullen face. "I- I will see and do it for you. Since I have some space."

"I'd be thankful if you did that, now shall we go?" Ark turned vigorously and went over the ridge.

Only then did Sid realize how horrible a person Ark was.

As soon as the bag space was acquired Ark's attitude did a 180 flip. When they found monsters, they never just went past. And no matter how long it took, he annihilated them and stored away in the items. That wasn't all. He collected all the grasses and fruits that caught his eye.

Needing to get to Giran even one hour faster, Sid stamped his feet, but Ark

acted like he didn't even notice. Sid wanted to spew curses at least, but somehow, Ark was his life's savior. Plus, they were already in Grey Ridge. He'd get killed by monsters if he got separated from Ark, so all he could do was keep his rage bottled up inside.

"Now, please hold onto this as well."

'Waaah, can't you even see I'm in a hurry? Am I just a bag? Are you treating me like a bag? Is that how it is? Dammit, this is the first time I've regretted my choice to be a Merchant this much.' He hadn't been this bitter even when he was being chased by Leo.

But no matter what Sid thought, Ark liked him. He liked Sid's cute appearance and pleasing personality. Plus, Sid was going to give him 40 Gold as a reward and protection fee when they arrived at Giran, so there was no way Ark couldn't be fond of him. The fact Sid had a lot of information was also helpful.

'To think that New World had such scrolls. In the future I shouldn't judge people by level.'

If the 'Lie' scroll could hide more than 15 levels, then even Ark wouldn't be able to do anything but die. 'Robbery' was also a scary scroll. Though they didn't impact the battle directly, they showed enormous power depending on their use. Merchants probably feared these two scrolls the most. Even so, Ark hadn't even known such scrolls existed.

'There's definitely a limit to getting info from a meager site forum.'

This experience made Ark keenly realize the best way to get information was to interact with other players.

But Ark didn't trust players. The case of Leo and Hargen alone was a testament how untrustworthy a player was. Therefore, as he headed to Giran with Sid, he tried to get as much info as possible. Knowledge was now a matter of life and death.

"A red scroll that can be misused on a player isn't sold in a normal village."

"Then where can they be obtained?"

"There is a village only Chaotic players can enter. In the Schudenberg Kingdom as well, there's a Chaotic village called the Lawless City Kairote. Since Merchants don't have much to do with it, I don't really know where it is. Anyway, they say there are lots of various scrolls and items there. 'Lie' and 'Robbery' are famous among them. For the most part, Chaotic players set on PKing use them."

"What other scrolls are there?"

"It's also good to be careful of the 'Trace' scroll Leo used on me earlier. As long as you know their name, it's a scroll that can find someone's location within a 1 kilometer radius. And there's also 'Null-Recovery.' If you get hit by this scroll, potions and recovery magic have no effect."

There were many more. 'Peek' let you look at the items inside an opponent's bag, and it was frequently used in combination with 'Robbery' by Bandits.

Of course, there were also scrolls that countered them. A typical one was 'Sword of Truth.' If another person was using 'Lie,' it was a scroll that dealt powerful damage while dispelling the effect. But 'Sword of Truth' was expensive and the places that sold it were limited, so it was too much to use

every time you hired a mercenary.

"There are more, but that's about all I know."

"Even so, it was a great help."

'Until now, I didn't have any interest in scrolls, but it's not something I can overlook.' Ark realized the value of information anew.

In fact, scrolls were such a specialized field that there was even a separate profession related to it. There were hundreds of types of scrolls, and among the Rare-class scrolls, there was even one that could deal a fatal blow to your opponent. And since the indirectly applied ones were also dangerous, even if he didn't use them himself, he needed to know them all to not be a victim.

'Kairote, huh...'

A village where only Chaotic players can enter. Since it was indeed a game with infinite freedom, it seemed there was a way for Chaotics could live with other Chaotics. Plus, countless scrolls with unknown effects were only sold in Kairote. If he could use those scrolls freely, it would definitely show an immense effect.

'I should go look for it one day.'

Ark also asked for information on various regions of the Schudenberg Kingdom, its specialties, and hunting grounds. Each time he asked, Sid answered him freely.

For a Merchant, information turns to money. Merchants who cleared routes alone didn't divulge such information lightly. No, other professions were the same. The reason why the information site forums were scanty was because

information hoarding. Since Ark didn't share information about hidden dungeons, he couldn't blame them. But since Sid owed Ark a huge debt, so he couldn't refuse sharing information. It was valuable information money can't buy.

"Ah, do you by any chance know about a place called the Underground World?"

"Underground world? I wonder?"

Ark asked on an off chance he might know, and Sid scratched his head. "I haven't been there, but I heard that among the Dwarven villages, there's even a place under the ground."

"No, I'm talking about a Beast village."

"If it's a Beast village, there's none I know, either. I haven't even seen a Beast myself, and players who choose to be Beasts start in the Sinius Principality."

"I'm not looking for a player village."

"Really? If I get some info later, I'll tell you by mail."

"Thank you."

"But can't we please move a little faster?"

Of course, Ark pretended not to hear Sid's last words. Even so, since they were moving, their goal steadily got closer. After about 20 hours, Grey Ridge finally stopped and the sight of the commercial city Giran came into view from the base of the hills .

Giran was larger and more grand than any city he had gone to.

Encapsulated by thick walls, Giran was divided down the middle by canals, marking off several regions, such as Trade, Production, and Magic. Each of the areas was bigger than Jackson Castle.

As soon as they arrived in Giran, Sid rushed over to the trading post.

"Ah, thankfully silk prices haven't dropped yet."

After a long time Sid came out with a much brighter expression. "Thanks to selling the silk, Ark-nim's japtem, and the pearls, my level went up by 5. Jewelry and Textile trading skill proficiency both went up by 40, and my silk share went up by 2% as well. All in all, this trade was a huge success."

"Congratulations." Generous with free lip service, Ark confirmed the ample money sack in Sid's hand and also felt good. "Then it's time to divide the money?"

"Ah, yes, of course." Sid smiled bitterly as he nodded.

Just the japtem in Ark's bag and what he had left with Sid totaled 50 Gold. Along with selling the 800 pearls at a 15% high price, the total was 418 Gold! It was more than the price of the trade goods Sid had brought while flinging himself around the Kingdom like crazy. Moreover, Ark's earnings had mostly no investment, so his margin reached 90%.

He received more than half the money bag. But Ark still eyed Sid's money bag with greedy eyes. It was his silent pressure to be given the promised protection fee and reward.

"Here you go. The 25 Gold I promised when I contracted Leo, and the 15 Gold special bonus." Sid handed over the money looking like he was going to

cry.

Ark quickly took it, packed it away, and laughed. "Thank you. Then I'll see you again next time."

"Yes; well, I'm gonna be in Giran for a while, so if you need to see me just contact me."

Ark parted with Sid for now. However, there were still things he had to do in Giran. Even after selling off that many items, there were still three or four items left in Snake's belly. They were items he couldn't sell to the store because they were unidentified.

'Huhuhu, he said he was gonna be in Giran for a while, right? Then I should check all these items and get Sid to sell them. Sid's going to get EXP from selling them anyways. This is what they call a win-win situation. Knowing a Merchant makes a lot of things much more comfortable.'

He'd really caught a sitting duck this time. Whether he liked it or not, he'd come to know Sid, so he had to use him to the max!

Inside his bag, 650 gold coins jingled. Thanks to that, as Ark headed towards the item appraisal store, his steps were as light as air.

* * *

"How much did you say it was?"

"It's 184,700 Won (~\$185)." The checkout clerk spat out terrifying words with a friendly voice.

A sigh puffed out on its own. Buying a 4 kilogram sack of rice, some vegetables, toothpaste, and a toothbrush totaled to over a 180 thousand Won.

It seemed prices had risen yet again, in short order, whereas workers' wages had been frozen for a year. The people's economy falling to ruin was like a textbook example. The electric, water, and gas fees also rose.

It had already been 10 years since the privatization of public services. In the name of improving quality, the utility fees had risen fifteen times. As a result, even though he only kept one light on at night in his tiny room, the shivering Hyun Woo was charged a bill of over 150 thousand Won (~\$150) every month.

Though his mother was just lying in the hospital, having to pay a hospital bill of 3 million Won (~\$3,000) a month was certainly an aftereffect of the privatization of health insurance.

Since Hyun Woo was busy making a living, he had no interest in the workings of national bond companies or whatever. Whenever a policy came out, there was a part could not understand the people who rose up in arms like a swarm of bees. But after taking personal damage from the aftereffect, his thoughts changed.

'Dammit, there's a reason why adults talk politics if they simply gather.'

However, he couldn't live without eating and using water just because money was precious.

'I'm jealous of Ark, who can use Survival Cooking.'

Granted, even if Hyun Woo could use Survival Cooking, it wouldn't make

much of a difference. In a city where it was hard to even see grass, there was no way he could get ingredients.

In the end, although he valued them like his life, he handed over likenesses of Shin Saimdang (50,000 Won bill), Sejong the Great (10,000 Won), Yi I (5,000 Won), and Admiral Yi (100 Won) to the clerk.

[T/N: Ark is referring to famous figures in Korean history who are printed onto the currency. It's like talking about giving someone a Lincoln (\$5) or a George Washington.]

Walking home with shopping bags, Hyun Woo's mind was busy calculating money.

His mother's rehabilitation treatment started this month too, so it would take about 4,500,000 Won (~\$4,500)... On top of that, the utility bill was roughly 450,000 Won (~\$450), rent and food expenses were 500,000 Won, loan payment and interest were 1,000,000 Won. In conclusion, the total expenses was at least 6,500,000 Won (~\$6,500) a month.

With the 7,000,000 Won (~\$7,000) he'd earned from selling items in the past and 3,000,000 Won (~\$3,000) he received from Global Axis for two months, he had thought he could endure for at least another two months. However, now it would be tough to last a month and a half. It was dangerous if he couldn't step up his game.

'Still, I can't skimp on mother's hospital fees.'

After life became difficult, the biggest thing Hyun Woo realized was life wasn't so easy. Everything Hyun Woo had lived on and enjoyed for 17 years were not for granted. They were the result of his father earning with sweat and blood and his mother saving and saving again. They raised Hyun Woo

with everything in a world with prices leaping like mad. He had to be grateful.

However that was then, now his pocket swung emptily.

Since he had to pay the hospital fee in advance, it immediately took a large sum. His loan payment date was also drawing very near. After thinking, Hyun Woo just shook his head.

'No need to worry. I still have over 2,000,000 Won left. And if there's no other way...'

There was still a final resort left to Hyun Woo. The 650 Gold he carefully kept in his bag!

It was an emergency card he could convert to 6,500,000 Won of real currency at any time. But just as money was necessary to live life, gold was necessary inside the game, too. At least for an unforeseen circumstance, he didn't want to touch the gold if possible.

'I still have time. Since I'm mostly set with my equipment, I'll put any worthwhile items I get on auction right away. Since my level went up too, there'll be more chances to get items worth money.'

Hyun Woo roughly finished cleaning his house and accessed the auction site.

Auction Complete. Reaper's Scythe : 600,000 Won (~\$600)

Auction Complete. Sharply Shining Sword : 350,000 Won (~\$350)

Auction Complete. Merciless Hammer of Destruction: 800,000 Won (~\$800)

Auction Complete. Spirit of Separation : 700,000 Won (~\$700)

'For now, I've scraped together 2,450,000 Won.'

Leo and Hargen's equipment sold for a better price than expected. Since he'd made a tasty sum from the items he'd taken from them, he thought he could understand why players went the path of the PKer even while bearing enormous penalties.

'However, there's a limit to the money you can make PKing anyways. And if you keep making enemies like, there would be a time when they won't be able to play the game at all. From a long-term perspective, it's actually no good. I have to make money my own way.'

Hyun Woo got in the unit and connected to New World.

* * *

"How much did you say it was?" Ark repeated exactly what Hyun Woo had said.

"The Low-grade Protect cancellation is 5 Gold, Intermediate is 10 Gold, and Advanced is 15 gold. Since it is impossible to identify items with the Ultimate

Protect, please use the item appraisal store of Bristania Kingdom's magic city, Hashui."

After leaving Sid, Ark immediately sought out the item appraisal store, because among the items he'd got underwater, several of them were unidentified. Since he couldn't even sell them while unidentified, he had to get them identified. But hearing the prices made his jaw drop on its own.

"W-why is it so expensive?"

"We only charge the fee the Magic Society announces. If you find fault with it, you can leave." The appraisal NPC, named Doltorun, made an unpleasant expression as he replied bluntly.

A sigh leaked from Ark's lips. The Identification skill only formed for people who observed many goods closely, so besides Magicians or manufacturers, it was nigh impossible to get.

But Giran was a commerce city, and there were many Merchants and manufacturer players. There were also bound to be people with the Identification skill among them. If he found them and made a request, he would be able to get them identified for 1-2 Gold cheaper.

However, he was reluctant to do so. He also didn't want to mix with other players, because if it turns out to be a good item, he wouldn't be able to maintain his security. Even if his luck was really good and a Rare item came out, the info might leak to Chaotic players.

'Although catching them and getting a bounty or an item wouldn't be bad either...'

There was no guarantee he'd be able to win with luck all the time. Moreover, Giran was a place where all sorts of high-level players gathered.

He wouldn't be able to handle facing two or three players around the level of Leo and Hargen. Now he knew scrolls such as 'Robbery' existed, he had to be even more careful.

'I can't ask a player to identify it even while knowing of the danger to save 1-2 Gold.' In that respect, an item appraisal store run by an NPC was trustworthy. 'Can't be helped.'

"Please check this first."

Ark held back tears as he handed over the fee and requested the appraisal of a low-grade unidentified item. The only weapon among the unidentified items, it looked like some kind of tooth.

"Please wait a moment."

Doltorun inspected the item carefully and the identification was soon complete.

Sharkman Fang Dagger			
Weapon Type	Dagger		
Attack Damage	4~6	Durability	10

Weight	5	Usage Restriction	None
A dagger made from a sharp fang of a Sharkman; the Merpeople use it when collecting pearls. It does not rust in seawater, but it breaks easily and repair is impossible.			
Value: 15-20 Silver			

Marking the value was an additional service of item appraisal stores. Thanks to that friendly service, Ark instantly fell into shock.

"20 Silver? W-what the hell? Then I can't even get the identification fee back?"

"Can't be helped. Item appraisal has no guarantee of getting a good result."

"What kind of irresponsibility...!"

"I simply did as I was asked, and identified it. The results aren't my responsibility, isn't that right?" Doltorun replied insultingly.

In the end it was like throwing away 4 gold and 80 silver on the street with one identification.

This was the biggest negative point of an unidentified item. You could make a lot of profit if it came out as an item with a good result, but if it came out like this, then you just wasted the identification fee.

'I'm gonna go crazy. What to do?'

He'd been all puffed up with expectation when picking up the items. But now that he was about to get them identified, caution exceeded his expectation. Of the remaining items, two had Low-level Protect and one was Intermediate. A whopping 20 Gold! If they all turned out to be japtrem, then 20 Gold went up into smoke.

Even so, he couldn't just throw them away. An unidentified item had a drop rate as low as a Magic item. It means there was a high possibility an item as good as a Magic one could surface.

It was a waste to throw them away, and identifying made him scared.

'This is completely being stuck between a rock and a hard place.'

This was Ark worrying about spending 20 gold when having 650 gold. While Ark was going back and forth about his decision Doltorun muttered angrily, "Won't you ponder outside please? Aren't you blocking the other customers?"

"Ah, no. That is...."

"Aaah! Just sell them at an auction and be done with it!"

"Auction? But unidentified goods can't be put up for auction."

Hearing Ark's reply, Doltorun pierced him with a look of derision. "You're driving me mad though I'm so busy I could die. Look here, customer! Giran doesn't have just one auction. Other than the normal auction, there are various types depending on nature. One of them is a place called the blind auction. As the name suggests it is an auction where one doesn't know what item they are getting. So, I mean it's a place where you auction unidentified items."

"Unidentified items?"

"It's a place where people like you who value the identification fee or can't even afford the fee get rid of unidentified items. Since both the seller and the buyer don't know what kind of good it is, whether they make a gain or a loss hangs on luck alone. I personally think it's just pathetic, but if you like it then go take a look. Next customer!" Doltorun fumed as he pushed Ark out.

Ark opened his bag and stared at the unidentified items. They were items with shapes like clam shells— items that strongly smelled like they wouldn't even make a few pennies if he identified them.

'Still, I can't just throw them away, so let's try going to the blind auction for now. I'll be able to pick up a few Silvers at least if they sell.'

The blind auction was in a corner of Giran, in the casino district. As soon as he entered the luxurious building the Auction NPC came up.

"Are you here to register an unidentified item?"

"Yes, I'm trying to register these three."

"Please register the auction starting price and auction period."

"10 Silver, 8 hours."

"Thank you. Please find the office after 8 hours. Will you look around the auction while you wait? If good luck follows, you can even buy a valuable item for a ridiculously cheap price."

Of course that was the plan. With the NPC's guidance, Ark entered the auction.

In a wide space, there was an enormous number of items on display. There, the auction progressed by looking through the items and jotting down a price on the memo attached underneath the item you wanted to buy.

Ark walked around looking at the items with interest. Weapons, armor, shields, even items like food ingredients and pottery were being auctioned. As expected, players looking to make a quick fortune were interested in the weapons or armor.

A good weapon or armor was incomparably more expensive than other items. Plus, since even an average one could be sold at a relatively good price, you could also minimize the loss in case of auction failure. Of course those items got a high price at auction.

No, it was too high.

'The auction price of an unknown sword is 30 Gold? If you add the identification fee that's 35 Gold. 35 Gold is just thrown away if this is just an iron sword, but people are still trying to buy it.'

While Ark was thinking, someone approached and raised the price to 31 Gold.

It was a robed Magician wearing glasses. The name written on the memo was Vidus. He glanced at Ark, who was blankly staring at him as he put in the bid. Vidus raised the bid again to 35 Gold and laughed. It seemed he thought of Ark as a competitor.

Ark couldn't understand his behavior.

35 gold for an item when he don't know what will come out of it?

If anything, wasn't it the same as gambling?

However the amount was nothing. After he looked around a bit, he saw that all the auction goods had eye-popping prices. There were numerous items with over 100 Gold as bids.

'For people to pour their money like this, it must mean there's that much merit?'

There was no way all the players were idiots. Participating in the auction while going as far as to pour in hundreds of Gold, there was no doubt it meant they could make a greater profit. The smell of money wafted into Ark's sensitive nose. He was just looking, but if there was money to be made, he couldn't just pass it up.

'For now, I've got to figure out why people are going so crazy.'

As Ark went around the auction, he started gathering info. And he came to learn a surprising truth.

The info was this: just a few days ago, among the items sold in the blind auction, an Epic item appeared.

No matter how low its stats were, an Epic was easily worth 10 million Won (~\$10,000) at the very least; as its name suggested, it was a sensational item. Therefore, player interest was rapidly rising.

That wasn't all. There was a rumor one player had gotten a Rare armor with just 50 Silver, and yet another player got a Rare skill book for 5 Gold.

'This is an incredible place!' Ark was shocked into attention.

Of course, there was no way such good fortune would come into his hand so easily. But depending on the situation, he could raise the profit by hundreds with a small investment. Moreover, Ark was in an immediate need of money. There was no guarantee anywhere he'd be able to obtain a Rare item within ten days with just hunting.

If he could obtain a Rare item here...?

'This is an opportunity, I might be able to get money for this month if I use it well.'

The problem was, he could accidentally suffer a huge loss.

'Still, I can't just blindly buy auction goods. First, I have to learn the trick to it. There was nothing in the world that had no trick to it. After all, they say gambling is 60% skill and the rest was luck.'

After that, Ark spent the next few hours observing the people wandering the auction.

Be it gambling or anything else, the first and foremost way to make money was to follow the expert. Someone with expertise in this field would have their own know-how. For now, the urgent priority was to find an expert.

After 3 hours, the person Ark found was the Magician wearing glasses he'd met not long ago, Vidus. Other people left after bidding on 1 or 2 items at most, but he went around bidding on scores of items in one go.

'That guy isn't just doing this casually. He's a person who buys and sells auction goods as a profession.'

Ark started to follow Vidus around.

Vidus' work method was rational. He didn't just recklessly raise the auction price, and if he found a worthwhile item, he wrote down the expected price, auction start time, and auction period on a notebook. When the auction closing time drew near, he checked the latest price and bid within a safe range. Vidus successfully won most of the goods after a few minutes.

'Is he checking the price before the auction closes and buying if it's lower than what he expected and forgoing if it's not? It's the trick to buying with minimal investment.'

Ark decided to use Vidus's method. About 1 minute after Vidus bidden, Ark quickly bid 1 Copper higher. After Vidus bidden, Ark used the last few minutes before the auction ended.

Through that method, Ark successfully won 6 auction goods.

'Alright, shall we check the results?'

Ark immediately ran over to the appraisal store.

The results: 4 were profitable, 2 were losses. Even with the auction and identification fee, there was a profit of 4 Gold left.

Inwardly, Ark cried out in joy. 'This is it!'

Though he wasn't completely convinced about the auction, 4 Gold was left even though he'd only gotten the cheapest goods. It wasn't much money, but

the important thing was that he'd definitely made profit. If he won more expensive goods, the profit would rise too. In addition, if he had good luck he could even hope for a jackpot item. It was the fastest way to make money.

'Alright, I'm gonna catch my share with this!'

After that, Ark used the same method to win two more times. This time, both made profit and he was able to earn 20 Gold. Money was rushing in just by sneaking around the auction and making bids. After seizing 24 Gold in just 20 minutes or so, the auction was so fun for Ark that he was quivering with excitement.

'To think making money was so easy!'

As he gained confidence, Ark was emboldened. 'Alright, shall I try a bigger investment this time?'

The more money you invest the larger the profits. Ark chased Vidus around as he bid on very important auction goods. And after Vidus passed, Ark quickly raised the bid.

He chose 6 goods going for over 50 Gold. He poured out a fortune of 300 Gold!

As if fortune smiled upon him, Ark won all 6 bids.

'Hehehe, looking at past results 4 of these should be good items. Since there's been a profit of about 20% more than the investment, I should make 60 Gold. There's no time. I should take care of these quickly and do it again.'

Ark took the auctioned goods and hastily sought out the appraisal shop.

"Welcome, ah, is it these this time?" Once Ark became a regular, the item appraisal shop's Doltorun became pleasant as well. "Then I'll identify them right away."

Fshhh! Looking at the information window with expectant eyes, Ark's face was drained of blood.

Broken Armor			
Armor Type	Plate Armor		
Defense	1	Durability	2/2
Weight	80	Usage Restriction	More than 150 Strength
Armor in tatters from many battles. In this condition, it can't be used even after repairing it. You can only melt it down and recycle it.			
Value: 10 Silver			

The item he'd bought for a whopping 60 Gold was recyclable trash. He was so dumbfounded that laughter started to leak out.

"The item you brought this time was really no good. Well, this is luck too."
"T-there's no way! Another one, identify another one!"
"Work is welcomed anytime."

As Doltorun checked the items one by one, Ark's face became steadily paler.

The remaining items were recyclable trash like the first one.

The most expensive one was only 2 Gold. Calculating his investment and loss, 400 Gold went up in smoke. At the same time, his extremely elevated mood plummeted to the ground.

Was this the feeling of not even being able to scream?

'W-what have I done?' His mind reeled in the dizziness.

400 Gold... in just a few minutes, he'd lost one month of his mother's hospital bill.

People who'd gone crazy with gambling and became homeless after losing their house came to Ark's mind. Whenever he saw such people, he thought they were pathetic. Though they had learned again and again, he couldn't understand why they were driven so far.

But Ark had no right to curse them. He was no different from them.

Once he made a little profit in the beginning, he'd gotten full of himself, as if he'd grasped the magic all on his own. Why did he believe such a weak idea was an absolute method and not question it? It was probably money, which clouded a person's eyes—the charm of Gold.

When Ark staggered out of the appraisal shop, Vidus rose from his seat in front of the shop and approached him.

"Have you come to your senses now?"

About to pass him, Ark flinched and raised his head. "What do you...?"

"I've spent two months of real time in the blind auction. During two months, do you think there was no one who took what was mine with a method like yours?"

"What? T-then you..?"

"That's right, since you were using a very dirty method, I joked a bit to teach you a lesson. Even so, I didn't think you'd actually buy all of them. You must've lost about 300-400 Gold. How do you feel? Your insides are souring, right?"

"Y-you—!"

Ark clenched his fists. 'A joke? Did you say it was A JOKE? Dammit, it may have been a joke to you, but it was a month of my mother's hospital bills to me! After making me lose them, you call it a *joke*? Is that what you spouted?'

But Ark clamped his jaw down and swallowed the words surging up his throat.

Ark had used him first. And he had never forced Ark to buy the items. Ark was the one who used Vidus as he wanted and was tricked. As upsetting as it was, he had no right to curse Vidus.

After glaring at Vidus, Ark hunched his shoulders and turned away.

"The rascals fooled by me all lost their marbles and spewed curses, but you're a bit different. Your actions are dirty, but your fundamental character is okay." Vidus pushed up his glasses. "However, the fact that you are stupid and lazy is the same as the others. I really can't understand why people get one thing but completely miss the other."

"What?"

"Using me alone may be a good method. Because when I choose an item, I can ascertain profit with a chance of roughly 70%. But why is it that you or the others aren't curious at all about how I can choose good items with a 70% chance? That's the problem with young fellows these days. They only think about making money easily."

"...!"

Ark finally understood where he went wrong. As he followed Vidus, Ark had considered himself clever. But after listening to Vidus' words, wasn't he wretchedly stupid? Ark had definitely only thought of making money easily, and he hadn't even thought about how Vidus was able to pick out items so well. His eyes had been clouded by the thought of getting fish that he hadn't even tried to learn how to fish.

As Ark turned with surprised eyes, Vidus laughed as he said, "Well, since the situation is like this and I did cause you a huge loss I'll give you a bit of advice. This game is virtual reality. The laws of reality apply directly to most of the things that exist here. Do you get what I'm saying? Just as items are worth money for a reason in reality, it means items in game were also worth money for a reason."

"Reason it's worth money..."

"One more thing—I work in an auction-related job in the real world as well. To say simply, it's not something a youngster with no experience should recklessly stick their nose in. Learn your lesson from this and throw away your dream of getting rich quick. There's no such thing as a way to make money easily in the world." With that, Vidus went towards the auction again.

Ark mumbled as he stared blankly at Vidus' back. 'He works in auctions in real life, too?'

It finally felt like the fog filling his mind was lifting. Just as Vidus had said, this place was a virtual reality. In other words, it was a copy of reality.

Until now, Ark had just thought of the auction goods as unidentified items. It was a misunderstanding. He had misunderstood everything from the beginning.

In the first place, there was no such thing as an unidentified item in reality or in New World. They weren't identified, but the shape of the item could be checked by eye.

He should have personally judged the value with his eyes, not with an information window. That was the strategy for the blind auction!

'Holy shit, how could I have just left everything to luck?'

He'd been tricked by the fact that the blind auction was in the casino district. Because of it, he had unconsciously thought it was a gamble. But the blind auction was not a place to gamble. Rather, it was the most realistic place. The

ability to carefully appraise an item and judge the value. It was a place to test and compete with that ability.

'In the end, that means you can work hard to succeed. If there's a means, I can't just give up like this.'

His tenacity flared up.

Hero Assembly

"I deliberately gave him advice but he still came back? He's a much more foolish fellow than I thought." Vidus tutted after he found Ark fearlessly snooping around the auction again. "Well, no need to concern myself about it. Since he took a beating once, he won't follow me. If he does, I'll just give him another bitter experience."

Just as Vidus predicted, Ark didn't follow him around. Actually, he didn't even participate in the auction for a few days. He just went around the auction looking at the items with hungry eyes. Ark finally participated in the auction after three days of nosing around. He bought cheap items worth a few Silver and checked them, but 80% were failures. He suffered a loss of nearly 20 Gold in no time, but Ark didn't give up.

'There's definitely something to it.' Ark steadily bought cheap auction goods after that.

Two days later, he began to see a change, his success rate went up from 20% to 30%, and once it started to rise, it didn't take very long to rise to 40%.

'I'm finally starting to get the hang of it. It's simpler than I thought.' After losing another 50 Gold or so; Ark felt certain of his perception.

Ark had experienced countless part-time jobs over the last 5 years. He tried things from basic newspaper and milk delivery, to sales and business. Among them, he especially remembered the job he'd obtained from Gwon Hwa-rang's introduction, working at an antiques store.

Ark came in contact with items from all around the world in that job. There weren't many items considered as hard as antiques to value. Things that looked extremely expensive turned out to be worthless, and sometimes the opposite is true. Therefore, losses or gains of thousands of Won hung with the Identifier's judgement.

He never formally learned it, however, as he worked there the ability to

guesstimate the value of antiques by eye and ear developed. There are many deciding factors like luster, shape, use, utility, and scarcity but they all result into one value.

The amount of heart and soul the maker poured into the item was critical. When an outstanding craftsman makes an item with their heart and soul, even if it looked shabby at first glance, something was 'unique' about it. One couldn't put a finger on it, but it definitely felt different.

They say practice makes perfect.

'Ah, that one's no good. Something's not right about it.' Most of the items he thought of in that way were fakes.

'Hm? That one's better than it looks?' Those were the valued antiques worth hundreds of thousands of Won.

'This place is virtual reality; item details are the same as in real life.' In order to confirm this, Ark spent a few days going around inspecting the auction goods. It wasn't a shocker, but New World also followed the same rules as the real world. This meant it was possible to know the value even if he didn't get it appraised and check the info.

After reaching a certain degree of conviction, he started buying items. By getting the items identified, he checked the differences from the actual feeling and steadily corrected his mistakes. It required an enormous amount of perseverance and concentration.

After spending several days like that, he stopped encountering losses.

But that wasn't all. As he checked countless auction goods, he sometimes encountered a totally unexpected bonus.

Old Coin (Ancient Relic)

This is an old coin used hundreds of years ago. The living conditions in those days can be glimpsed by the design carved into the coin's surface. The coin is a relic of the past, but it is popular among collectors, so it can be sold for a high price.

Value: 10 gold

Bonus from acquiring information about the ancient relic, Old Coin:

Knowledge of Ancient Relics +1, Intelligence +1,
Fame +5.

There were items relevant to Ancient Relics mixed in with the Unidentified items. If he had such an item identified, and held it, he received a bonus to his Knowledge of Ancient Relics stat.

'Now that I think about it, the Mysterious Stone Fragment that was in Gallic's stomach required 50 Knowledge of Ancient Relics to check the info. I was worried about how to raise the stat, but there's a method like this.'

Currently, the stat was at 36. Although it only rose by 1, there were still many auction goods. It wouldn't be too hard to get to 50 if he steadily appraised them. Moreover, the Intelligence that rose along with the Knowledge of Ancient Relics was critically necessary for Ark, who summoned Familiars.

'I found yet another reason to stay in the auction house. Okay, I'm getting

more and more motivated.'

Once Ark made up his mind, it was scary how persistent he was. Besides a few hours of sleep, Ark just about lived in the auction house. Slowly, he grasped how much to bid for each item. As his success rate steadily increased, his money also started to pile up, if only a little.

Once he made some surplus capital, he dragged Sid to the auction.

"Sid-nim, from now on I will point out some items, so please bid on them at the auction closing time. Of course, give up on it if it exceeds the max sum I tell you and aim for another item."

"What? But I was just about to leave for a trade..."

"Please do this as a favor. Didn't we cross Grey Ridge together?" Ark held Sid's shoulders and stressed Gray Ridge.

'This isn't receiving help, but holding them by the scruff of their neck.'

In the end, even Sid became a zombie wandering the auction house.

Completely caught by Ark, Sid heaved sighs; however, it was profitable for him as well. Ark stockpiled the items from the auction and sold them through Sid. Thanks to this, Ark made a profit and Sid's EXP rose steadily. Of course, no matter how trustworthy Sid was, the Trade Contract was indispensable!

Thanks to Sid, Ark gained some free time and immediately started another job. He re-auctioned items he'd bought cheaply when there were few people.

'This one is can be sold for 13 gold at most. Since it has Intermediate Protect,

once I spend 10 Gold on identification, there'll only be 3 Gold left.' He re-auctioned such an item with a starting bid of 3 Gold. However, Ark wasn't as naive as to just wait for the item to sell itself.

The auctioneer can't place a bid on their own items. But an NPC can.

Ark used that fact to summon Dedric and made him participate in the auction. Ark had to pay if Dedric won the bid, but since Dedric wasn't the one who submitted the item, it wasn't a violation of the rules. The small fee he had to pay to put the item up for auction wasn't much of a loss, either.

He had hit upon the auction's blind spot.

Ark had Dedric and Sid raise the prices on his items. The price was rapidly increasing, so of course it seemed like a good item to clueless people. After doing that for a few hours, they hooked 1-2 blind fish. At that point, the two who had been raising the price for a while immediately backed off.

Even without seeing it, he knew what the expression of the players who took the item they won to the identification shop would be.

"A-Ark-nim. This is a scam."

"Of course not. Not knowing is a sin, that's the world of auction."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is," Ark concluded, with a completely remorseless expression. What he said wasn't wrong. After all, Ark had learned it from Vidus.

Ark spent ten days like this. Except for when he appraised and sold auction goods, he lived attached to the auction house.

Money kept coming and going so crazily that he couldn't tell how much he made or lost. One thing was for certain: he was making money! No, it was only inevitable he would make money.

'By now, I've probably recovered more than the 400 Gold I wasted in the beginning.'

It was what Ark was thinking of as he headed to the auction house again when a message box appeared with a cheerful sound effect.

You have learned a new skill.

Discerning Eye (Special, Passive, Beginner): You have seriously identified countless items for a long time. As a result, you have gained an outstanding eye for sorting out items.

Mana Cost: 20

* You are now able to clear Low-level Protect of unidentified items.

* You can now immediately determine the value of items whose market prices have been checked before.

'W-what's this?' Ark's mouth fell wide open.

The Identification skill could only be learned by production classes with over 300 Wisdom or Magicians with more than 500 Intelligence.

The only exception was to use a Rare skill book. However, Ark, a Dark Walker, was able to learn a skill of the same effect without spending a single

penny. In addition, he also gained the ability to immediately determine the value of an item, which was only possible at the identification shop.

It wouldn't have been possible if he hadn't sharpened his eye at the antiques store.

"That's right, in this game, if one fully concentrates on one thing then a related skill will form. However, to think I was able to learn an Appraisal skill when my class isn't Production or Magician-related."

There was a benefit to spending over 10 days in the auction house. The new skill further increased Ark's earnings. It was only low-grade, but 10 identifications was 50 Gold. In another five days, even after selling 300 Gold to pay the hospital fees, he still has 900 Gold piled up in his bag.

In the end though, there was a limit to the amount of money he could make at the auction house.

"I don't see any more useful items now." Ark looked around the auction with regretful eyes.

It has been half a month since he started his auction house life. Now, Ark had a success rate of almost over 70%. Since he'd bought all the useful items like crazy, there were only lousy-looking goods left.

It was an auction that only dealt with items users put up, so there was no way the auction goods would be submitted infinitely.

'Is it about time to leave this place?'

Ark was torn. Although there wasn't a single worthwhile item left, one

thing bugged him-- the auction item currently in front of him.

It was a sooty sword blade without a handle. On the surface it looked to be trash; but, if inspected closely, there was a peculiar aura emanating from the blade. The problem was, the feeling he sensed from it didn't feel like it would make money.

'No matter how you look at it, this doesn't seem like it's going to make big bucks; although it feels like there's something there.'

Normally, he probably would have just bought it; but, the circumstances was a bit different this time.

'Just who is this guy named Danil?"

The item's starting bid was just 10 Gold. Even so, nobody bid on the item for the next few hours. It just showed how shabby the item looked. That was why Ark thought he could get it easily and bid 10 Gold and 1 Copper. But the moment he took his eyes off, a player named Danil raised the bid to 15 Gold.

Because of him, Ark's competitive spirit was aroused and he kept raising the price. Before he knew it, the price had rose to a whopping 40 Gold.

'What the hell? Why is this Danil guy so obsessed with this item? I haven't seen his name in the auction before...'

Seeing the price higher than he imagined, Ark placed a bid for 40 Gold and 1 Copper as a test. Perhaps because Danil's competitive spirit was flaring up, he bid a whole 100 gold. One could only think he was crazy.

'If that guy isn't crazy, there's something about this. This is too extreme to be

fishing.'

After Ark used the method of inflating prices in the auction house, there were players who used similar methods. Such a method, which he called fishing, was used with discretion to the situation. If he raised the bid to 100 Gold in one go, what kind of madman would get hooked?

This was the reason why Ark was concerned. It looked like he was fishing too obviously. It made him think he wasn't actually fishing. In addition, Danil was a name Ark hadn't seen in the auction house. 100 Gold wasn't an amount that an auction noob would recklessly put out without any certainty.

'But to spend as much as 100 Gold... It's too ridiculous.' It was rare for even a flashy-looking sword or armor to go up by 50 Gold.

'What to do? Should I think of it as my last go, close my eyes tight, and bet on it?'

Even after recovering his loss, he had still earned 250 Gold. Including the Gold he sold to pay for hospital bills, that was a total of 550 Gold! However, for Ark, 100 Gold was not small change.

To invest the money he had earned, running around the auction house like crazy for half a month, it was not a decision he could make lightly.

'Fine then, since I've learned the Discerning Eye skill you can't even get with money here, I've made a huge gain anyways. I've earned all I can from the auction house. Now, as a commemoration of finishing up my life in the auction house, let's trust my eye! Whether it's a success or a failure, I'll part with the auction with this!'

Just when Ark made a big decision and stretched out his hand to the bidding memo, another hand approached at the same time and flinched as it stopped. It was unthinkable for there to be another player who was going to bid higher than 100 Gold on an item like this.

With a surprised expression, Ark stared at a Merchant player he'd never seen before. The player looked at Ark and frowned slightly.

"Are you perhaps Ark-nim?"

"Then you're Danil?"

The Merchant nodded and said, "I don't know why you're trying to win this item, but I absolutely need this item. Won't you please yield?"

'This guy must be a beginner.'

Ark's eyes flashed for an instant. The auction is a battlefield. A battlefield where victory is won with wits and timing rather than swords and shields!

For Danil to show his feelings like this, in such a place...

After Ark saw Danil's response, he perceived that the sum Danil had bid wasn't just fishing. With his fidgety appearance, it was clear there was some reason he had to win this auction no matter what. In other words, this was an item that was guaranteed to have a profit worth the amount he had bid!

'I'd be an idiot to lose such an item in the auction.'

Without saying a word, Ark raised the bid to 110 Gold.

Danil flew into a rage and bid 120 Gold. However, without even batting an

eye, Ark raised the price several times. Danil's face soon paled. When the price finally exceeded 200 Gold, Danil complained with an exasperated expression.

"You're too much."

"It wasn't too much. The auction house has always been such a place. If there's something you want, you don't ask your enemy to yield-- you do whatever it takes to crush your opponent. Don't you know asking him to yield was your mistake from the start? If you don't have enough money to bid, get out of the way."

At that moment, another person approached and said what Ark had wanted to say. The person was none other than Vidus, who had been in the auction house for the longest time.

Vidus glared at Danil with disparaging eyes. Danil made an enraged expression, but he walked away as if he had nothing to say.

Then, Vidus' gaze settled on Ark.

"Are you also set on this?"

"There isn't any other worthwhile item."

"Hmm, you seemed to be buying up quite a lot of items. It only takes a rough calculation; you must've made a few hundred Gold."

"I wasn't following you, Vidus-nim."

"I know that much. I saw you buying even items I gave up on early." Vidus studied Ark with fresh eyes. "But this is truly amazing, just how did you learn

how to judge items properly in a few days? I may have given you a hint, but it shouldn't have been easy. What's more, looking at the bids you've made, your eye for judging an item's maximum price seems more precise than mine. To be able to judge an item not by Silver but down to the Coppers... Is there some sort of method I'm unaware of?"

It was the result of his tenacity to save even a single Copper.

"I didn't know it then, but my eyes are somewhat high quality." As Ark answered while grinning, Vidus nodded.

"So your high quality eyes have set their sights on this item? Then, I too can't just yield it to you. Since my income isn't the same as before because of your unruly meddling, I'll make up for it with this chance."

"Are you saying you want a bidding war?"

"That's right."

Vidus laughed as if amused by the bellicose Ark. "However, since that fellow has dropped out thanks to you, there's no need to raise the price too much, right? It's ridiculous for professionals like you and I to senselessly raise the price like crazy. It's not good to shed each other's blood. Therefore, I'll make a proposal."

"Please continue."

"There isn't much time left before the auction closes, so there is no need to drag this on. We'll write down the max we are willing to go. And the one who writes the higher amount gets the item. How's that?"

"Sounds good." Ark answered without hesitation.

After all, if they had a price war there was no way Ark would win. Vidus, who had been earning money at the auction for a long time, would have many times more capital than Ark.

In fact, Ark was certain Vidus was the player who had bought the Epic item, wandering around the auction house. There was no way he could win with money against such a well-endowed player. Even if he did win, he couldn't hope to recover his losses after raising the price even more in a battle of pride.

'Alright, how much should I write down? How much will Vidus call?'

Now that the match had started, he found it quite difficult. Ark agonized for a moment, thought of something, and quickly wrote down a price.

"Now, at the count of three, we'll both reveal them."

At the same time, they both showed their prices.

Vidus had written 220 Gold. After checking the price, a triumphant smile spread on Ark's face.

"It's my victory."

"...Dammit, how did you know how much I was going write?"

"I remembered the time I spent following you. Vidus-nim, you have a habit of betting exactly 10% higher when you are bidding decisively."

Vidus winced, then let out a sigh and shook his head.

"I lost. I completely lost."

"Then I will take this item."

Ark wrote 220 Gold and 1 Copper on the item's memo. As soon as Ark wrote it down, the sound ending the auction rang and the NPC managing the auction came to collect the item. Once he went to the management office and paid the price, it'd be his farewell with the blind auction.

"I'm leaving this place today. So don't worry and keep making lots of money."

"Look who's talking-- you cleaned out all the profitable ones in just half a month, you scary bastard." Watching Ark run off with his backpack jingling, Vidus stuck his tongue out.

Raising the price by 10% at a time was a habit he'd picked up while managing auctions in real life. But who would have thought a rookie would pick up on the habit he himself had forgotten all about.

"With an eye of that level, it'd be fine to leave him the entire auction house. Should I have asked where he lived? Seeing how fast he picked it up, he's probably working in the field already. Shame."

Just as Vidus was turning while smacking his lips, someone ran in helter-skelter and rejoiced when they saw the item had disappeared.

"The auction finally ended!"

Vidus stopped walking and turned around. It was a young player wearing a set of black leather armor. Next to the player was Danil, sporting a helpless expression-- he looked around and tearfully made an excuse with an apologetic face.

"I'm sorry, Shambala-nim. Because another user bid more than 200 gold, I wasn't able to win the item. Since it went past the agreed upon amount the contract was invalidated... I will return the money entrusted to me."

"Wh-what did you say? What are you talking about? 200 gold should have been enough..."

As Danil returned the money pouch, the user named Shambala's face twisted.

The player who had actually wanted the item was not Danil but Shambala. Because of an urgent quest, he had promised payment and had entrusted the auction to a Merchant instead.

Vidus grasped the gist of the situation and tutted, "Tsk, tsk, you had a proxy contract with that fellow?"

"Ye-yes, so what?"

"It's a shame, but the item you wanted was taken by someone else."

"Wh-who was it? Just who was it?"

"His name is Ark, and he took it for 220 Gold and 1 Copper. That guy is very tenacious, so if you want to buy it, you'll probably have to add at least 100 Gold on top of that price. If you still want to buy it, you should hurry and follow him. He's probably going to the appraisal shop right now."

Before Vidus even finished talking, Shambala ran out of the auction house.

"That rascal Ark, he surely took his share to the very end."

* * *

Unfortunately, while Shambala was running towards the appraisal shop, Ark was strolling to the Trade district. The item had low-level Protect; since he had the Discerning Eye skill, Ark didn't really need to go to the appraisal shop.

"Well, shall we see the result? Discerning Eye!"

With a cheerful sound, the item's information window popped up.

Black Frost Blade (Ancient Relic)

It is an abnormal blade made of iron. There is a mysterious ancient rune engraved on the surface, inscribed in a forgotten holy language of magic.

However, the chill emanating from the blade is like a grim aura that has drank much blood. The holy ancient rune seems to have been engraved to restrain the evil aura. There is currently no way to find out where it was used, but it likely wasn't used for good.

Value: —

Bonus for learning about the Ancient Relic -
Black Frost Blade:
Knowledge of Ancient Relics +10, Intelligence
+5, Fame +5.

"Wh-what?" Ark burst out in confusion.

Though the description on the item was good, the problem was the value: '-'. That meant it couldn't be sold in a store! An item he had invested 220 Gold and 1 Copper on was just a DECORATION!?

For the first time in a while, Ark felt dizzy.

'Damn it, as the old saying goes, there is no such thing as a successful gambler... Just when I thought I'd saved up some money, I waste it all in the end!'

Ark was about to throw the blade into the canal in anger, but he soon changed his mind. After reading the item description, it seemed like there was something to the item. If he was lucky, as he had been with the Mysterious Slate, it could also lead to a good quest, or turn into something useful if combined with another item.

'If I acquired a hilt or a sheath, for example, it could become a useable sword...'

The chance of that was very low, but it would be better to hold on to it and hope for the best rather than throwing it away.

Until now, all the ancient relics he had obtained from the auction only raised Knowledge of Ancient Relics by 1. But the Black Frost Blade raised it by 10! The stat had risen by that much when he found the hidden ancient ruin.

If only because of that, it couldn't be called an average item.

'Well, I'll pack it away for now.'

"Snake, stone fragment."

Snake, who was dozing off, snapped awake and spat out the stone fragment. He had failed to make profit, but he did raise his Knowledge of Ancient Relics by 10. He had gained 8 Knowledge of Ancient Relics from the auction house. Thanks to that, his Knowledge of Ancient Relics stat was now 53.

'At least now I can check this item.'

As soon as Ark held the stone fragment, it vibrated as an information window popped up.

- With the Knowledge of Ancient Relics, you have confirmed the Stone Fragment Infused with Ancient Power.

Stone Fragment Infused with Ancient Power (Star Fragment)

This stone is a part of a very mysterious and awesome power. It was created by the power of darkness, but it possesses light properties.

Knowledge of Ancient Relics has confirmed this to be one of the Three Marvels of Hero Maban from the Dark Century, long ago. Hero Maban left a part of his own power in this marvel for future generations. If a Truthseeker comes into possession of this marvel, they can acquire a part of Hero Maban's knowledge.

* The penalty imposed upon the owner has disappeared.

*The owner of the Star Fragment can utilize Hero Maban's techniques.

Experience +30,000. Knowledge of Ancient Relics +15, Intelligence +10, Fame +20.

You have learned a new profession exclusive skill.

Gift of Darkness (Passive): All Dark Walker abilities unfurled in the dark will increase slightly. Stats will receive a 30% increased growth. Duration of 'Stealth' has been increased to 15 minutes. However, it is impossible to level up this skill.

You have learned a new profession exclusive skill.

Bladestorm (Active, Beginner): The first of Hero Maban's secret skills; it shatters the sword to make a maelstrom of shards that violently tears the enemy apart. The used sword is completely destroyed.

Mana Cost: 400

Wasn't it said that there is pleasure at the end of suffering?

He wasted all the money he worked to death on for half a month, but thanks to that, he was able to check the Mysterious Stone Fragment. And as he'd

expected, the stone fragment was one of Hero Maban's Three Marvels. A legendary item sealing a part of Hero Maban's power, a Star Fragment!

The rewards from it were enormous. It was hard to say anything about Bladestorm since he hadn't used it yet, but Gift of Darkness was better than leveling up a couple of times.

However, the greatest success of all was that his goal as a Dark Walker was now clear. He needed to find Hero Maban's Three Marvels. If he knew what his goal was, he knew what he must do. Because of this, Ark was able to take a step forward as a true Truthseeker of Hero Maban.

'I'm certain a Dark Walker gets skills whenever they find a marvel.'

Most professions were able to learn 5-6 exclusive attack skills when they were done with the job-change. On the other hand, Ark had only received 2 skills, and Summon Demon wasn't an attack skill he could use directly.

Dark Blade was quite a useful skill, but he had felt that having just one attack skill was lacking.

'Bladestorm, huh... it drains Mana like crazy. If I don't raise my Mana more, there'll be almost no chance to use it with the Familiars out. And the fact that it destroys the sword bothers me. It would be nice if the damage was as great as the penalty...'

In any case, it seemed he'd received the reward for investing 220 Gold and 1 Copper.

"Alright, if the result is good, all is good."

Ark made a pleased expression. He went in and out of shops to prepare his bags for a departure from Giran, when--

FSSSHH! *FLASH!* *BOOM!*

The sky suddenly darkened, then a flash of light flew in from afar. The light crossed Giran and smashed into the top of a tower high in the sky. Sparks flew as the whole tower swayed. It was Giran's Magic Institute Tower.

The Magic Institute Towers built in several cities resonated with each other. When there was a need to send a widespread dispatch, it was transmitted and received through magic by the towers just like now. He'd read about this on the Jackson Castle forum, but it was his first time actually seeing it the dispatch being received.

Alarmed, the other users were also staring transfixed at the Magic Institute Tower. Not long after, a Magician hurriedly ran out of the tower and casted loudspeaker magic.

"Urgent message! A few hours ago, an unknown Dark Army launched a surprise attack on Jackson Castle. Because of their attack, Jackson Castle has suffered enormous damage and its people are shivering in fear. The Lord of Jackson is still resisting with his forces, but the Dark Army is stronger than expected, so the future is uncertain."

At the Magician's words, the players started to talk amongst themselves.

Monsters organized an army and invaded a castle? It was an unimaginable event.

Users who started in the Schudenberg Kingdom all went through Jackson

Castle. All the users held their breath and stared piercingly at the Magician.

"If left as it is, Jackson Castle will be completely trampled by the Dark Army. But most of Schudenberg's forces are stationed in the frontier regions, so deploying them will take nine days. Therefore, the Magic Institute has considered the urgent issue and has decided to recruit volunteers from all regions."

"Volunteers? Does that mean we can also participate?"

"Of course. We are urgently recruiting brave warriors to save Jackson Castle. The Magic Institute promises a great reward for he who contributes in the war. Those who call themselves brave adventurers, please gather immediately at Magic Institute Tower. We have no time. The airship sent by the Magic Institute will depart Giran for Jackson Castle in 3 hours."

"It's a special event!"

"An event where one can get awarded by the Magic Institute!"

Wide-eyed users flocked to the Magic Institute Tower. Of course, Ark was also mixed in with the others and ran towards the tower.

But because the airship had a fixed capacity, not all players could be used. Magic Institute Magicians checked the players' info one by one and only granted the quest to the qualified.

"Next person, please."

When Ark approached, a Magician pushed a crystal ball toward him. Then, Ark's character information window popped up before his eyes.

Character Name	Ark	Race	Human
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Alignment	Good +100
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Fame	700	Level	68
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Profession	Dark Walker
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Title	Cat Knight, Soul Caretaker
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Health	1,415	Mana	975 (+100)
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Spiritual Power	100	Strength	178
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Agility	218 (+17)	Stamina	268
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Wisdom	27	Intelligence	186
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Luck	43	Flexibility	15
Art of Communication		18	
Affection		23	
Special Stat: Knowledge of Ancient Relics		63	

Equipment Effects

Black Bear Mouse Leather Armor: Agility 2, Frost Resistance +20
 Cat Paws: Attack Speed +10%, Agility +15, Critical Hit Rate +10%
 Crystal Golem's Head: Mana +100

- * All abilities will increase by 30% in the dark.
 - * You have the ability to hide in the darkness (15 minute duration. Cancelled when you get into combat).
 - * Resistance to Fear, Darkness, Blind, and Seduction spells is increased by 50%.
 - * You can bring out the true abilities from all types of tools.
-

From the EXP he'd earned in Grey Ridge and from checking the Star Fragment, he had leveled up to 68. His Health was 1,415, and his Intelligence had also risen from examining Ancient Relics to bring his Mana close to 1,000. And although it didn't appear in the equipment effects, the attack power

from Lancel's Sword couldn't be ignored. If he equipped the the Guardian Armor of Merpeople on top of that, a Warrior was nothing to be jealous of. With his Agility over 200, it greatly increased his crit rate, evasion, and damage. Since his various other skills had also improved dramatically, he was at a level where it wasn't embarrassing to show his stats.

As expected, the Magician's crystal ball recognized Ark's skill and shone with blue light.

"Thank you for volunteering. Please take this badge. This symbolizes your participation in the battle as a member of the Magic Institute. Please head to the top of the tower now. The airship will arrive soon."

Magic Institute Badge

A badge given to those who participate in the defense of Jackson Castle through the Magic Institute. If the battle is won, those with the badge will be rewarded by the Magic Institute according to their contribution.

As soon as he received the badge, a quest window popped up.

Hero Assembly (Event Quest)

An unknown Dark Army has launched a surprise attack on Jackson Castle. The Lord and his soldiers are currently doing their best to block them, but the Dark Army is overwhelming them.

You must defeat the Dark Army before the Jackson walls that have protected

the peace of the residents collapse. It is an opportunity to show the skill you have honed and polished through your long journey.

The hero who contributes greatly to the rescue of Jackson Castle will receive the reward prepared by the Magic Institute.

(You must protect Jackson Castle or defeat the Dark Army after three days in real time or until the arrival of the Schudenberg Kingdom's forces. If you die, the quest will be automatically failed and you will not be able to log in for 72 hours as the quest progresses.)

Difficulty: ++C

Quest Restrictions: Level 60 (A player under the minimum level cannot be recognized for their contribution even if they participate in the battle)

* * *

"Huh?" As he checked the system after eating dinner, Kim Gwon-tae cried out in surprise. The monitor suddenly turned black as an enormous amount of data came up like crazy.

"What's it doing all of a sudden?" Startled, Kim Gwon-tae focused on the data screen. The data coming up like crazy was all in preparation for a single event.

After hastily flipped through a thick booklet and compared it to what was on the screen, Kim Gwon-tae screamed.

"Team Leader, a protect-type level C event has activated!"

"What?" Ha Myung-woo came running in as he asked, "What are the activation conditions?"

"I will check it now."

Kim Gwon-tae took out a laptop, connected it to the main computer, and checked the data while typing as if possessed. He found a few conditions and answered, "It's an event having to do with the 7 Heroes. The starting condition is that there have to be at least 4 players with a Hero-related profession and 2 of them have to find a clue about the Heroes."

"Damn, it's progressing too quickly. Kim Dae-ri, do we have any way to find the players with Hero-related profession? If you can also find the players who found the clues, even better."

"It's impossible at this time. There are scores of Hero-related professions. Among those, there are people who failed the quest for job-changing and a few who succeeded. What we can do with the system is too limited, so it's impossible to investigate them all. The only player we've currently confirmed as having found a Hero clue is Alan, who job-changed to Holy Knight. You probably know this, but he is one of the applicants."

"Is there a way to interfere with the event?"

"No."

"Does it mean all we can do is watch..." Ha Myung-woo bit his lower lip angrily.

It was pathetic. New World, the perfect virtual reality game that still remained unparalleled. But for Ha Myung-woo, New World was full of faults. The game was perfect, but because it was so perfect, it couldn't be controlled by an administrator.

A sword you can't use is no better than a stick.

'Damn those crazy bastards!'

Nausea rose to his throat. He was cursing the developers he had boasted of so vigorously in the reception room.

Those so-called world-class scholars seemed to have gone a little touched in the head after working on the game for a long time. In the end, they fell under the misconception that they were true Creators. That was the start of all the problems.

The world they created must be perfect. A perfect world where all existences must obey the absolute laws.

With those absolute laws, the creations accepted the game as one world and had to overcome trials prepared by the Creator to write a new history— it was a world where no external influences were permitted.

The result of such a crazy idea was an unprecedented virtual reality game, the true nature of New World.

The developers put up so many locks that there was almost nothing an administrator could do freely. The planning team tried to use all sorts of methods and means to break those locks, but it was all for naught.

As a result, the understanding of New World by the planning team was not much different from what the players knew. They couldn't find out what kind of professions there were, or what kind of skills, even what kind of events would happen.

Even the operation of the game was the will of the AI constructing the game

and not because they wanted it. They had released the game since the investment had been enormous, but nobody knew how the game would unfold. Of course the planning team didn't know, and even the developers, who called themselves Creators...

From the perspective of Global Exos, this was an extremely dangerous situation. Collecting players for the entrance exam was actually just an excuse to probe the system.

'Park Woo-seong, you bastard!' Ha Myung-woo ground his teeth.

All the locks on the game were from the developer who had disappeared with the game's completion. Park Woo-seong, a developer who boasted fame as a genius game designer.

In any case, as long as Park Woo-seong didn't release the locks, there was no way for the planning team to engage with the game.

"Then at least search for information on the players involved with the event."
"But..."

"Even if you have to look up hundreds of players one at a time, find them before the event ends! If we find them, it'll be possible to predict when the next event will begin."

"Understood." Kim Gwon-tae's fingers danced across the keyboard.

An event no one predicted was happening. A new history was about to begin in New World.

TO BE CONTINUED...

